

Miracles are by their very nature highly unusual events. God rises above His normal way of working in this world and performs a *supernatural* deed to show His glory. When He sent His Son to earth to be the Savior of the world, God accomplished an unusual *number* of miracles to show the glory of His Son. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter said this about Jesus' miracles: **Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst.** (Acts 2:22) By Jesus' miracles, God was giving testimony to us of His Son, that He is the Messiah whom we should devote our lives to in true faith.

Yet every miracle is different, and presents the Messiah in a new and wonderful light that we might see His glory more clearly and entrust our sinful lives to Him more fully. And of all the unusual miracles Jesus performed, the healing of the blind man in Bethsaida, is a very *unusual* form of the *unusual*: here is a man Jesus healed in two stages. It took a double miracle to restore His eyesight. This is the only miracle of this kind performed in the Bible.

The context of this miracle

First Jesus spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, and the man was partially healed: he could see men like trees walking. He could see something now, as opposed to nothing at all! But everything was a blur; nothing was clear to him. Then Jesus put his hands on his eyes again, and this time the miracle was complete. The man could see everything clearly. What is going on here?

Did Jesus make a mistake the first time? Did he underestimate the difficulty of this particular case of blindness, like a doctor prescribes antibiotics too weak, and it doesn't get rid of the infection all the way, and then you have to go back to him for a heavier dose? Was this a failed miracle, and it took Jesus two tries to get it right? Did this one require an extra shot of divine power? After all, Jesus is also fully human and maybe this time he did not fully understand the situation.

We can quickly dismiss this explanation. Miracles are invasions of divine power, not human power. This was not a failed attempt, for Jesus was very deliberate about this whole event, asking him if he saw anything. This is in some way a moment of instruction, and a special revelation of His divine power, not a failure of His divine power.

Or, here's another possible explanation: Jesus is getting bored with the usual miracles and he decided to change it up a bit, just for fun. After all, he can do anything anyway he wants, and this time he thought he do things a different way. But this explanation is also an attack of the glory of Jesus. He is not playing a game. Every work of Jesus is aimed at revealing new dimensions of His glory, and has a specific context and purpose whereby Jesus is accomplishing something special as a testimony to us.

Here is one more explanation, one used by the charismatics: here Jesus is showing that every Christian gets saved in two stages, and needs two baptisms. First you need to believe, and be saved, and receive your water baptism. But you're only partly saved at this point. Now you need a special baptism or outpouring of the Holy Spirit where you become fully dedicated to God. So many Christians have only the first baptism and are not seeing things very clearly, they say. They need a second work of Jesus in their lives. Well, there's *something* true about this: we constantly need Jesus' work in us to open the eyes of our faith – not just once or twice! But the idea that Jesus saves people in two steps is false. The Bible is clear that when you first believe in Jesus, you are filled with the Holy Spirit and fully consecrated to God. (see, for example, Ephesians 1:13, Galatians 3:1-9).

When we look carefully at the context it becomes clear to us why Jesus healed this man in two stages. Jesus is ministering to the problem of unbelief in His 12 disciples. They have just witnessed two bread miracles in which Jesus clearly showed them His glory. The first was the feeding of the 5000 with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish, with 12 baskets full of leftovers. (Mark 6:31-45) Immediately after that they set sail across the Sea of Galilee. While Jesus was asleep in the boat and huge storm came up and they did not trust Jesus to keep them safe **"because their hearts were hardened for they did not understand about the loaves."** (Mark 6:52) So soon after seeing His great glory, their faith failed!

Then, just a little while later, Jesus performed a second bread miracle to show His glory again. This time He fed the 4000 with 7 loaves of bread and a few small fish, with 7 large basketsful leftover. What a mighty, loving Shepherd is the Lord Jesus.

Immediately after this 2nd bread miracle they're in the boat again on the Sea of Galilee. This time they're upset that they took no bread with them in the boat. What would they do for lunch? When Jesus talks to them about the leaven or the false teaching of the Pharisees and of Herod, they immediately think he's talking about the fact that they have no bread in the boat. So soon after the second bread miracle they're back in their unbelief. Their eyes have such a hard time seeing, knowing and trusting Jesus. And they limit their lives to the material world.

So Jesus did some catechism with them, asking them a series of 9 questions, based on the double bread miracle:

¹⁷ **But Jesus, being aware of it, said to them,**

“Why do you reason because you have no bread?

Do you not yet perceive nor understand?

Is your heart still^[b] hardened?

¹⁸ **Having eyes, do you not see?**

And having ears, do you not hear?

And do you not remember?

¹⁹ **When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments did you take up?”**

They said to Him, “Twelve.”

²⁰ **“Also, when I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of fragments did you take up?” And they said, “Seven.”**

²¹ **So He said to them, “How is it you do not understand?”**

In this dialogue Jesus focuses on 1) hard hearts, 2) blind eyes, and 3) lack of understanding. The disciples have a major eye problem, not with their physical eyes, but with their spiritual eyes, their ability to see and understand the glory of Jesus Christ. He opens their eyes to see His glory – and they're amazed at Him – and then immediately follow that, they forget His glory. They can't see Christ anymore. They're blind to Him. Faith is really a seeing – about having a special set of spiritual eyes to see the Truth, especially the capital “T” truth of Jesus as the Christ of God!

And then comes the double miracle of the healing of the blind man, answering the double bread miracle and the disciples' hardness of heart and blindness of the eyes of their faith. This miracle is very clearly a teaching moment for blind disciples!

Application

This is the blindness of faith. In some measure these 12 disciples, most of them at least, believe in Him. Yet their faith is so clumsy and stumbles in many ways. Jesus is right in the middle of a situation of spiritual density – Jesus does a great work and they believe in Him, and the next moment their stuck back in the rut of not seeing the glory of Jesus as they deal with the problem of having only one loaf of bread in the boat for the 13 of them!! John Calvin calls this the excessive stupidity of our faith – how quickly we get lost in the muddle of life, right after Jesus shows us His glory in His Word and by His work in our lives, and can't see our way through unless Jesus our Teacher comes to us and renews our faith and shows us His glory. The power of unbelief living in believers is very, very stubborn. Spiritual growth is slow, hard and gradual, it is step-by-step process.

The Glory of Christ in this Miracle

In this context this miracle is a perfect fit by our perfect Shepherd and teacher to instruct slow-hearted disciples.

First we must see the tender-heartedness of the Lord Jesus Christ in this miracle. He is not only out to instruct His disciples, He is out to rescue a poor man from His blindness. ²² **Then He came to Bethsaida; and they brought a blind man to Him, and begged Him to touch him.** ²³ **So He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town.**

Here they are in Bethsaida, a town about 2 miles Northeast of the Sea of Galilee, back in unclean Gentile territory. It is possible that this blind man is a Gentile but we are not told. Some friends brought a blind man to Jesus. This was a common scene in those days, blind people with empty eyes, staring, oozing pus, swarmed by flies, being led around by friends.

The next action is beautiful (Jesus does each miracle his own way): *Jesus takes this man's hand, and there they go, walking hand-in-hand, to a place outside the city.* This is an act of fellowship and friendship, and an act of leadership. This is *not* a case of the blind leading the blind and both falling into a pit, but the all-seeing, all-knowing Light of the world leading the blind toward dignity and restoration. Here's a reminder that false religions with their blind idols can only take you down into a pit. But Jesus is the God who sees and if He takes your hand and you walk with Him, He will lead you to sight and to glory! The

Bible uses this image for God more often. He says to Israel, **I took you by the hand to bring you up out of the land of Egypt.** He says: **For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, "Fear not, I am the one who helps you."** (Isaiah 41:13)

Jesus leads him outside of the town and outside of the crowds because this is a miracle especially meant for His disciples, not for the public. It is part of His special instruction for them.

And when He had spit on his eyes and put His hands on him, He asked him if he saw anything.

²⁴ **And he looked up and said, "I see men like trees, walking."**

Everything was blurred. It was like looking through a stained-glass window. Nothing was clear. All he could see was some dark shapes moving about. But this was already a miracle, that He could see anything at all! It takes the work of Christ to understand any amount of truth at all. But there was still a lot of blindness in this man's new vision.

The same is true of our faith: there is still a lot of unbelief mixed into our faith so that our faith is constantly in need of the Saviour's helping hand. Our prayer must always be the prayer of the father who brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus for healing. When Jesus challenged him for doubting the power of Jesus to heal his son, the father blurted out: **Lord, I believe.**

Help my unbelief! (Mark 9:24)

Then Jesus completed the miracle in a second act of healing:

²⁵ **Then He put His hands on his eyes again and made him look up. And he was restored and saw everyone clearly.**

Now there was nothing lacking in his vision. His eyesight was fully restored. The Lord had rescued this man completely from his darkness and brought him completely into the light of day.

This is one of the clearest testimonies of God that His Son is the Messiah, the one who saves us completely from our sins and God's judgment, and the one in Him we must trust completely for everlasting salvation. Remember how Isaiah says that when the Messiah comes, he will cause the dumb to speak, the deaf to hear, the blind to see! **Behold, your God will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.** (Is. 35:5-7)

It should not surprise us then that the very next thing that happens is that Jesus asks His disciples who He is. They answer that there are many different and false opinions of Him but, in truth, **You are the Christ.** (Mark 8:28) How did Peter and the others come to see and say this? Christ opened their eyes and gave them the knowledge of the truth about Jesus. He gave them the true confession. To know Him is eternal life. To reject Him is eternal death. Matthew records the fuller version of this dialogue. Jesus responded to Peter's confession: **Blessed are you, Simon, Son of Jonah! Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.** (Matthew 16:17) God had to open His eyes to know and confess Christ in truth.

But even then there was unbelief mixed in Peter's faith. In the very next passage he rebuked Jesus for being ready to suffer and die and rise again. **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."** (Mark 8:33) This is shocking – that a man who such a clear grasp of the truth in one moment, is so far away from it in the next. One moment he is speaking from God. The next moment he allows Satan to direct his mind and mouth. How weak and fickle these 12 men are, who will later be sent out as His apostles! How could Jesus commit the everlasting Gospel to such men?? When He sends them out later as His apostles to the ends of the earth, they will need in an absolute way the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, to guide them into all truth, to open the eyes of their hearts and protect them from the lie.

Here the LORD Jesus is showing His disciples what they need – the powerful touch of Jesus so they can know Him rightly. This cloudiness they have is a problem they cannot solve in their own power. They need to confess they see men like trees walking. They need to ask and seek for greater and clearer knowledge of Jesus. On the day of Pentecost that gift will be poured out, the gift of the Holy Spirit, **the Spirit of wisdom and knowledge who enlightens the eyes of our hearts.** (Ephesians 1:17-18)

Applications

Often our faith is as clear as looking through a stained-glass window where you can just see shapes moving around. Our view of Jesus, and of God's promises in Jesus, is not very clear. Even though He is with us, His glory is blurry. The problems and worries of life become like heavy dew on the windshield early in the morning. And it takes the Lord Himself to clear the fog away so that we can see Him clearly and see the victory of Christ on the other side of the sickness, or the temptation, or the threat! If the Lord is not with us, and is not instructing, rebuking, correcting, and training our faith by His Word and Spirit, we would fall away from Christ in a moment. We need His miraculous power to believe. We need His miraculous power to keep on believing. We need His miraculous power to grow in our faith so that we see Jesus more and more clearly, and understand the truth of His Word more and more fully.

Let our prayer always be: *"Open my eyes, Lord, to see you. Open the eyes of my mind so that I may know you as I should. Take the dimness and darkness of my faith away. These assaults I'm experiencing are enough to destroy my faith. Help me, Lord!"* Anything that happens to us in this life, big or little, can assault our faith. For the disciples it was first a storm at sea, and then it was having only loaf of bread in the boat. Cancer, decreased hours at work, a struggling marriage, a difficult child, a smooth-talking friend, worrying about our appearance – all these things and many more can send us into a downward spiral of faith and tempt us to doubt the goodness and power of Christ.

The Heidelberg Catechism explains the 6th request of the Lord's Prayer this way: *By ourselves we are too weak to hold our own even for a moment. For our sworn enemies, the devil, the world, and our own flesh, never stop attacking us. So help us Lord with the strength of your Holy Spirit so that we do not go down defeat in this spiritual struggle, but may firmly resist our enemies until we finally obtain the complete victory.* (QA 127)

Let us always then be humble in our faith, depending on the work of Christ, for unbelief is so near.

Let us live very closely to the preaching and study of God's Word, for that is how Jesus grows our faith and keeps our faith focused on Him. Peter exhorts the believers: **Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, ² as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, ³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious.** (I Peter 2:1-3) In other words, there is much evil stalking your spiritual life, and the only way to survive is to crave the pure milk of the word. Then you will surely grow in your salvation, for God's word does not return to Him empty. When you become distant from the Word, your faith in Christ will certainly hit disaster.

Let us fellowship with the Lord Jesus faithfully at the Lord's Supper, doing it in remembrance of Him, because through the Supper He communes with us and draws us into closer fellowship with Himself.

It is only by the touch of the Master's hand that we can know and confess the Christ in truth, and see Him plainly. And in God's great wisdom, this does not happen all at once. It happens step-by-step. For this reason we must stay very close to Jesus in the means of grace (the preaching of the word and the use of the sacraments) for that is how today He reaches down from heaven and keeps touching the eyes of our mind by the Spirit and giving us a clearer and clearer knowledge and understanding of Jesus. And you know with full confidence that faith which seeks Jesus, though it may be assaulted often, will not be destroyed. For the Lord Jesus has you in His hand and will never let anyone snatch you from His hand.

Too often in the church we are finished with Jesus long before He is finished with us. We think our faith has arrived and we have no further to go. We become complacent and lazy and no longer seek help for our faith. How our faith is stunted and endangered by that! *Do you want to spend a lifetime seeing men like trees walking?* Pray for open eyes! **Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.** (II Peter 3:18)

Conclusion

If faith is a struggle for you, don't trust in yourself for solution. Jesus is the healer. He opens blind eyes to give you faith in Him. Ask Him to work this miracle in you. Nothing's impossible for Him! He also fights our unbelief and doubts, and keeps our eyes open to Him in truth. Put your faith in His hand and ask Him daily to help you. Then you will see clearly.