

Mark 7:24-8:10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Mark chapter 7 verse 24 to chapter 8 verse 10. For it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.

But she answered him, Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. And he said to her, For this statement you may go your way, the demon has left your daughter.

And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone. Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.

And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. And they begged him to lay his hand on him. And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue.

And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, Ephatha, that is, be opened. And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

[1 : 23] And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, He has done all things well.

He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak. In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat, he called his disciples to him and said to them, I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days, and have nothing to eat.

And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way, and some of them have come from far away. And his disciples answered him, How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?

And he asked them, How many loaves do you have? They said, Seven. And he directed the crowd to sit down on the ground. And he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people.

And they set them before the crowd. And they had a few small fish. And having blessed them, he said that these also should be set before them. And they ate and were satisfied.

[2 : 28] And they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. And there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples, and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

At the end of Mark chapter 7, Jesus goes to the region of Tyre and Sidon. This might recall the story of Elijah, who stayed with the widow of Zarephath, and also raised her child from the dead.

Much as Jesus delivers the child of this Syrophenician woman living in that region. The woman begged Jesus to deliver her daughter. And Jesus seems to deny her request, telling her that the children should be fed first.

That it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. Jesus doesn't send her away, but he gives her a seemingly very harsh response. Possibly quoting a popular proverb, rebuffing her with an unflattering statement about Gentiles, that seems to place them outside of the realm of God's blessings.

Jesus' mission is not to people in general, but to Israel especially. Although the claim that the children should be fed first, holds the door open a crack. The woman, however, responds to Jesus' presentation of an obstacle, by taking that obstacle and turning it around to her benefit.

[3 : 44] By this point, we should have picked up on the fact that Jesus seldom goes out of his way to heal people. Nor does he make things easy for the people who want to be healed by him. People have to come to Jesus.

Those wanting healing or deliverance often face obstacles or initial rejection and have to beg and persist in order to get anything. But we must recognise that such dogged persistence is exactly what Jesus wants from them.

In presenting these sorts of obstacles, Jesus is calling for strength of faith in the petitioner, expecting them to wrestle with him until they get their answer. The obstacles aren't proof that Jesus doesn't want to heal and deliver people.

Rather, his healings and deliverances call for faith from their recipients. Where such persistent faith is lacking, people are not healed. This is an example of the sort of prayer that we should practice.

The deliverance of the daughter of the Syrophoenician woman is also an anticipation of Christ's deliverance going to the Gentiles more generally, and the surrounding context is very much focused on Gentiles.

[4 : 45] Jesus continues to travel in Gentile regions, in the region of Decapolis, and there's a deaf man with a speech impediment brought to him, and people beg him to lay his hands on this man.

Once again, the begging suggests the importance of persistence. Jesus takes the man away from the crowd, puts his fingers in his ears, and using spittle, presumably on his finger, touches the man's tongue.

He looks up to heaven, sighs, and speaks a word of healing in Aramaic. Once again, the original Aramaic of a powerful healing utterance is preserved for us by Mark, just as he did in the case of Jairus' daughter.

The man's ears are opened, and his tongue is unshackled, suggesting the removal of bonds, maybe, that Satan has placed upon him. All of this recalls Isaiah chapter 35, verses 5 to 6.

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. We should read this story alongside the parallel story a few verses later, in chapter 8, verses 22 to 26.

[5 : 53] 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. The parallels between these two stories are quite pronounced when we look closely, and it should be noted that it is also a fulfilment of Isaiah chapter 35, verses 5 to 6, the eyes of the blind being opened.

We should remember how important Isaiah's prophecies are for Mark within his gospel. Having instructed the healed deaf mute not to tell anyone, the released tongue of the man cannot help but declare what Jesus has done for him.

And the people's response is astonishment and praise. He has done all things well. After this, Jesus is once again surrounded by a great crowd that lacks food.

[7 : 00] And we have another miraculous feeding account. In an event highly reminiscent of the earlier feeding of the 5,000, Jesus repeats the pattern of the Lord's Supper in verse 6, once again making his disciples minister to a large flock.

However, this time the flock seems to be largely Gentile. The similarities with the earlier feeding of the 5,000 suggest that we are expected to recognise a connection between the two, and that is underlined later on in this chapter.

These are two parts of a single story. Both of these events anticipate the future ministry of the disciples, as they will minister Jesus to the multitudes, both Jews and Gentiles.

This seems to be in a largely Gentile region. It continues the Gentile focus of the last two stories. Jesus feeds not only Jews, but presumably many Gentiles too. We should think back to the conversation with the Syrophenician woman.

Gentiles, who might be dismissed by dogs by some, are here feasting on the same food as the children had enjoyed. There is the feeding of the children first, and now the feeding of those who are the Gentiles.

[8 : 07] The first feeding involves the feeding of 5,000 people. This may be connected with Israel's military ordering. And there are 12 baskets gathered up. Here there are 4,000 people, maybe connected with the four corners of the earth.

And there are 7 baskets gathered up. The 5,000 is the primary act, but the Gentiles are blessed with the Jews. And there are leftovers for others.

There is a super abundance, more than enough, for others besides Israel. There are 5 loaves in the first feeding. There are 7 loaves in the second. Altogether, that makes 12 loaves.

12 loaves represented Israel in the showbread. We have already noted that the 5 loaves might be connected with the 5 loaves taken of the showbread by David in 1 Samuel chapter 21.

So together, the loaves given to these two groups make a new 12. There are 12 baskets gathered up on the first occasion, and then 7 baskets gathered up on the second occasion.

[9 : 07] 12 for Israel, perhaps 7 for the fullness of the nations. These are both significant numbers in Scripture, numbers that suggest some type of fullness. 12 associated with Israel, 7 associated with the days of creation, the scope of creation more generally.

Jesus is bringing together a new people. And all of these events connected with the Gentiles suggest that they are an important part of what Christ will perform. And his disciples will be ministering this.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which these stories give us an image of the Gentiles' spiritual participation in the awaited kingdom of God?