



The Gospel of Mark

Mark 6:30 – 8:26: Dense Disciples

Along with the Jewish leaders, the demons, the crowds, and Jesus himself, the disciples are main characters in Mark's drama – the only ones who are near Jesus throughout. This role links the disciples' fate to Jesus' early on. When Jesus eats with the wrong crowd, they are interrogated (2:15-16). When they do not fast (2:18), pick grain on the Sabbath (2:23-24), or don't wash their hands before dinner (7:1-5) Jesus is interrogated. They run errands for him (3:9, 11:2) and guard him amid the masses (5:31).

Mostly, though, the disciples just follow Jesus around. They listen to him teach the people and argue with the leaders and demons. And they watch with very wide eyes as he works wonder after wonder. By the time we reach chapter eight, the disciples have seen Jesus cast out demons (1:23-26; 5:1-20; 7:24-30); heal many diseases (1:29-34; 6:53-56) like leprosy (1:40-45), paralysis (2:1-12), a hemorrhage (5:25-34), and deafness (7:31-37); raise a young girl from the dead (5:21-24, 35-43); still a big storm on the sea (4:5-41); and walk on water (6:45-52).

Slow and Confused

Despite their front-row access, the disciples are slow and confused as they size Jesus up. Having begun their journey following a teacher, by chapter 4, they have begun to wonder if they've stumbled on more than a teacher: "Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him (4:41)?"

In this week's section of Mark, the disciples make very little progress in answering their question. Our section is bracketed by two feeding stories. In 6:30-44, the disciples tell Jesus it's time to end a long teaching day and send the multitudes home for supper. His compassionate instinct is to feed these masses, so he replies, "Let's host the meal here!" But the very-miracle-familiar disciples have absolutely no idea how they can do that. "Think of the cost, Jesus?!"

Between the lines we sense Jesus' growing impatience. But he refrains from saying, "How much do you think a wind-and-wave calmer is selling for these days?" Instead: "Inventory, boys! How much food DO we have?" The count is meager. He prays, they distribute the scraps, and before they know it Jesus has fed 5,000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish. In fact, the leftovers far exceed the original stock.

It soon becomes clear that Mark's Jesus has a purpose for the feeding in addition to hospitality. It is supposed to teach his disciples a lesson. So, do they learn? The next wonder follows "immediately" when Jesus hikes atop the water to catch up with the disciples' boat. They are initially terrified (who wouldn't be?), but when they realize that it is Jesus who has sauntered over the sea, they are "astounded." The narrator tells us why: "They did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened." (6:52)

These disciples are slow learners. Their next C minus moment comes after Jesus' discussion about clean and unclean things in chapter 7. When the Pharisees and scribes ask why Jesus' guys don't observe hand-washing rules, Jesus attacks their habit of ranking human precepts over the obvious divine teaching of Torah. He simplifies his answer for the crowd: people are not made impure by the food that comes into them, but by the words that go out of them. Clear enough. But the disciples don't get it. When they "asked him about the parable," Jesus was fed up: "Do you also fail to understand?!" By now, the disciples should be getting these things.

The Meaning of the Whole Book

The disciples' daftness comes to a head in this section in 8:1-10. To understand how, it will help us to picture Mark's process as an author. Throughout the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries NT scholars pictured Mark as a clumsy collector who haphazardly stitched together the Jesus stories that he received. Karl Ludwig Schmidt once described Mark's job as putting "pearls on a string."

Mark 8:1-10 is one of the reasons scholars thought so little of this author. "Was he throwing in the kitchen sink? Could he not see that he had just told almost the same story five paragraphs earlier?!" To these scholars, Mark's editorial principle seemed to be, "The more, the merrier!"

Only in the last four decades have students of the NT begun to appreciate the subtle method to Mark's apparent madness. Narrative criticism shifted its focus from the individual paragraphs and asked about the meaning of the whole book. And so they looked at this "doublet" differently, asking what Mark might be trying to communicate by this repetition.

From a narrative-critical perspective, we care about the word "again" in (Greek: *palin*) at the beginning of the second feeding (8:1): "There was again a great crowd without anything to eat." This little adverb tells us that the narrator knows he's repeating himself and we start to expect a purpose. We care about the bits between the two feedings (discussed above) that reveal the disciples' slowness to understand.

If the repetition is purposeful, suddenly 8:1-10 becomes signature evidence of the disciples' failure to understand. Because very soon after seeing Jesus feed 5,000 people with a little bread and fish they're desperate before 4,000: "How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?!"

Foreshadowing

All of this foreshadows more important failures that lie ahead for the disciples, when they will thrice whistle as Jesus predicts his death, sleep through his moment of anxious prayer, and finally head for hiding places as he is arrested, tried, and executed. By the time of his resurrection, which he also foretells for them three times along the way, they are nowhere to be found.

Why would Mark paint this dreary picture of Jesus' disciples in his Gospel? At first glance it seems discouraging. If being with Jesus day after day didn't even clue the disciples in, what chance do you and I have to understand who Jesus is?

This is another good Markan mystery. I believe the author has a plan for the rehabilitation of the disciples and of us. Keep watching them through the final eight chapters, and we'll pick this conversation up again when we get to chapter 16.

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