

9-28-25

Empty

Mark 8: 14 – 21

For the past couple of weeks, I've been reading and re-reading Mark's accounts of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand and his sequel of feeding the four thousand.

In doing so, I was hoping to discover some deep insight into how each episode was similar to each other and also how they differed from each other. In the process, I think I learned at least one valuable point:

That in the feeding of the five thousand, the disciples were the first ones to bring the topic up to Jesus concerning the plight of the people. They were also very eager to offer a ready-made and practical solution to the problem:

"By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. 'This is a remote place,' they said 'and it's already very late. Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.'"

In the subsequent feeding of the four thousand, the tables were turned. Instead of the disciples coming to Jesus to make him aware of the situation, Jesus broached the subject, calling his disciples to himself and saying: *"I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance."*

I'm not positive, but I imagine this was Jesus' way of testing the disciples - to see if they had learned anything from the previous miraculous feast.

Apparently, they had not, however, because we learn from Mark's account that when they were travelling across the lake after the second miraculous event, Jesus overheard the disciples' conversation, and immediately interjects, and in effect, chastises them:

"Why are you talking about having no bread?

Do you still not see or understand?

Are your hearts hardened?

Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?

And don't you remember?"

Then, after quizzing them about how many basketfuls of bread they collected after each miracle – possibly in hopes of refreshing their memory - he repeats his earlier question. *"Do you still not understand?"* as if he's amazed at their spiritually dull condition.

To be perfectly honest, this is exactly how I felt after two weeks of struggling with these texts. I kept asking myself the same question: "What am I not seeing?"

What am I not understanding?"

What am I missing?

I was asking these questions because I was convinced that I was no better than the original disciples - not understanding what Jesus was expecting me to understand!

What **were** the disciples supposed to understand after picking up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread the first time and then seven more basketfuls of bread the second time?

Do you understand?

Sure, I could give some trite and pre-packaged answer like Jesus is the Bread of life and we need to look to him for all of our spiritual nourishment and sustenance – and I wouldn't be wrong in saying this, but I think there's more here.

We do need to understand what Jesus wanted his disciples to understand, and yes, it is about Jesus being the bread of heaven come down to us to nourish and sustain our souls into eternity, but it's also about ... nothing.

Yes, you heard me right. Nothing.

These events in which God displayed his power and provision and care are also about emptiness and us acknowledging the void in our lives - understanding that until we acknowledge our emptiness and go to God in our emptiness, desiring to be filled not only with the good things God has for us, but by God Himself, we cannot receive Him and be filled by Him.

Jesus wanted his disciples to understand and experience nothing so that they would desire Him. And what I mean by nothing is emptiness and hunger, darkness and blindness, deafness and an absolute lack of everything whether that be a lack of food or shelter,

sight or sound, intellect and spiritual insight or faith – and to know that they could do nothing about it.

And we find all of these nothings right here in chapter 8 of Mark:

First, the mass of people have nothing to eat. Their bodies are empty. They are void of nourishment and sustenance and their condition is so serious that Jesus makes the comment that they would never be able to make the journey home because their bodies would give out under the strain of travel and malnourishment.

Have you ever experienced this condition?

I can't say that I have, but I read a true story about a man who got separated from his exploration party while travelling through Yellowstone National Park. At that time, the park wasn't even considered a park yet. It was a newly discovered mysterious and monstrous tract of mountains and meadows out west that needed to be surveyed and mapped.

After spending nearly 40 days alone eating nothing but some nuts and moss and flowers, fending off a mountain lion, and sleeping by geysers to stay warm, he was finally discovered by a trapper. He was delusional and on the brink of death. This man experienced the whole gamut of emotions: lostness, helplessness, hopelessness, emptiness, desperateness, just to name a few.

The mass of four thousand people was physically empty. And the land they had come upon was empty too. There was no food there. It was remote place and McDonalds wasn't established yet.

Everyone felt the loneliness and remoteness and emptiness of the place.

You know, even in large crowds we can feel the emptiness and even be empty inside. Even though there can be lots of activity swirling around us, and lots of people busily carrying out all sorts of activities, we can feel lost just as if we were in a remote place. We can feel lost and empty on the inside too.

Last weekend was a prime example.

With all the hustle and bustle of Heritage days and the scurrying around in the kitchen to flip pancakes and serve nearly 300 hundred people, emptiness can still be sitting on our shoulder ready to creep into our lives. And maybe this is a good thing. Maybe emptiness can stir within us a longing to find the deeper meaning of life and remind us that we need to spend some time seeking Jesus – the Bread of Heaven.

The Pharisees were empty. Empty and void of faith.

They came seeking Jesus as soon as he got off the boat, but they didn't come to him in faith. They were full of unbelief and defiance. On the surface, they wanted Jesus to prove his divinity – to show that He truly was from God, but on a deeper they wanted to see him fail.

So, Jesus basically told them that they were a day late and a dollar short: *“Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it.”*

What is ironic about Jesus' response is that in feeding the four thousand, he did exactly what they requested! - performed an undeniable sign of his deity, but these Pharisees were not there to witness it. No matter, even if they had been there, they had no intention of believing it.

Their purpose in seeking Jesus was to discredit and destroy. They were empty of faith, empty of humility and empty of the desire to learn the truth. So, Jesus got back into the boat and left them to their emptiness.

Jesus still does this with people today. Jesus sees and understands our intentions. If people seek Jesus or read his word only to find fault in him or to sling mud at him and his followers or to do even greater harm, He will leave them to their ungodly devices so that they will continue to feel the futility and the full weight of their empty ways.

The Apostle Paul talks a lot about this in Romans chapter 1, saying this: Those who *“suppress the truth by their wickedness, their thinking became futile, and their foolish hearts were darkened.”* And that *“God gave them over to a depraved mind to do what ought not to be done.”*

God demonstrates his incredible love and patience to us sinners, but his patience is not forever, and the ship that’s docked at our shore to bring us salvation will one day shove off never to return.

The disciples were empty.

Empty and void of understanding. Jesus says even their memories are shoddy. He asked them point blank: *“You don’t remember?”*

This reminds me of the story I heard about a patient with amnesia. Did you know he actually cured himself? Yes, it’s true! His memory came back to him the moment he forgot he had amnesia!

Seriously though, the disciples were empty of spiritual insight and therefore vulnerable and susceptible to the lies and intentions of those in leadership positions.

Notice that Jesus even goes so far as to lump the Pharisees together with Herod! – the religious community and a government agency - Jesus specifically warns his disciples, “*Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod.*”

Jesus is essentially saying that the Jewish religious leaders and the land’s top governmental leader are both operating under the influence of the evil one, and their evil disposition could ultimately affect and influence them negatively and dangerously.

The blind man from Bethsaida is empty.

He’s empty of vision. His eyes see only darkness and therefore he is empty of light which is necessary to have vision. But Jesus put his hands on him and restores his sight.

Notice that Mark tells us that Jesus put his hands on the man twice before he “*saw everything clearly.*”

Could it be that Jesus was teaching a lesson to his disciples who were there watching the whole thing?

Hey guys, you got to see me feed the masses twice, and you’re still in the dark and not sure what to make of it. I touched this man twice and his vision is completely restored and he sees everything clearly. How many more miraculous banquets must you witness before you see clearly?

Here’s another emptiness in chapter 8 of Mark:

Zero communication.

Jesus tells the blind man who has just received his sight to not go back to the village. I assume Jesus says this so that he won’t be

overrun by another mass of humanity once the news of this man's healing becomes public.

But notice also that after Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ – God's Anointed One, Jesus warns his disciples to not tell anyone about him – similar to what is implied to the healed man.

Why?

I think it's because the people, including his own disciples, have no clue - zero understanding - as to how the Messiah is going to save and rescue his people.

Their understanding of a Messiah was that he was going to be a heroic, warrior-type person who would overthrow the Roman government with a mighty army and with power and violence if necessary, so He could sit on a earthly throne and bring peace to the nation of Israel.

They had no understanding - or at least didn't want to believe that the Messiah would take on the role of a suffering servant – the type of person that Isaiah described in chapter 53: *“He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him ... nothing in his appearance that we should desire him ... He was despised and we esteemed him not. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”*

So, Jesus tells them not say anything because their minds remain empty concerning God's plan for his Son and the salvation of the world.

And this is exactly why Jesus's next lesson to his disciples is about his death – about how he will be rejected and killed.

And this is more than Peter can handle. Just as Jesus took the blind man aside, away from the crowd to heal him, so Peter took Jesus aside to help him see more clearly, but his effort results in Christ's rebuke: *"You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."* You are filled up with the world's lies and you are empty of God's truth.

Jesus teaches his disciples what Paul teaches us in Philippians chapter 2. That ...

Jesus, "who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!"

This is the final and ultimate emptiness.

God empties himself so that we might be filled.

He empties himself of his perfect and precious life so that he can be a sacrifice and an atonement of sin.

As Isaiah 53 says ...

"He was cut off from the land of the living;

for the transgression of my people he was stricken.

He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death,

though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth."

Jesus, the exact image of God himself became nothing so we could experience something ... something beyond beautiful – something everlasting - something so overwhelmingly truthful and joyful and satisfying for the deepest parts our hungry and needy soul that it will take all of eternity for us to understand it.

Do you still not understand?

It's okay. Look around. There's an abundance of morsels of truth that are here for the gathering. And as we chew on them, digest them, and are nourished by them, we will be mysteriously healed, and we will see everything clearly.

I conclude with the Apostle Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 13: 11 – 12:

“When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”

Amen.