

# Study Four

## The Northern Journey (7.24 – 8.26)

*Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion for these people...' Mark 8:1,2*



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Jesus' ultimate destination is of course Jerusalem, but for a while Mark pauses in his narrative to include a diversion northward from Galilee into Gentile territory and the region of Tyre and Sidon, cities in Phoenicia (which was in Syria).

Tyre was famous as a harbour and fortress, and 26 miles further north was Sidon, both independent cities with their own kings, gods and coinage. This was Gentile territory, although interestingly in Joshua's time it should have been part of Israel (Joshua 19: 28, 29)!

As an aside this part of the world is famous for being the area from which sailors first began to navigate using the stars. Phoenician sailors found their way to Britain and particularly the Cornish tin mines.

Why did Jesus make this journey of several months? We're not told, but there are several suggestions:

- 1) After so much pressure from the crowds so early on in his ministry he needed space.
- 2) He wanted time to get to know, and continue the education of his disciples.
- 3) He was rejected by the population back home, Herod was scared of him, the Pharisees accused him of breaking their laws and his family thought he was deluded. This was a good time to take his message to the Gentiles.

## A Faith is Tested (7: 24-30)

Wherever Jesus went, word spread and people gathered. Here in Tyre is a Greek woman with a daughter in need of healing. This

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Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. People were overwhelmed with amazement. 'He has done everything well,' they said.  
Mark 7:36

is an unusual story, which is possibly why Mark includes it. On the surface it would seem that he's actually insulting the woman with all this talk of dogs. All she wanted was help, not hassle!

To some Jews, Gentiles were compared to the wild dogs that roamed their towns. To Greeks it

referred to a shameless woman. But in fact Jesus used the diminutive word describing the little lap-dog which was a household pet, and in Greek this has affectionate connotations. Knowing what we do about Jesus, perhaps there was a sparkle in his eye as he spoke.

The woman is not offended, seems to understand what Jesus is saying and answers back! She accepts that the Bread of Life had come firstly to the Jews but had the faith to believe he had also come for all who were hungry.

We need to remember that Jesus' primary mission was to the Jews, and spreading the message to the rest of the world was the task he gave the Church (Matthew 28:19-20), but here he lays the foundation stones of what was to come.

## Sensitivity! (7:31-36)

Jesus still seems to have unfinished business in Phoenicia and treks a further 26 miles north to Sidon, perhaps to try and have some quality time with his disciples. It is likely that several people were brought to him for healing, but Mark tells us of one in particular, a man who is deaf and dumb.

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The miracle tells us something about Jesus, and is a model for the way we should approach any work of mission. Jesus treats this man as an individual with particular needs. He takes him away from the crowd to a more private place where he won't feel embarrassed by his affliction. Jesus uses gestures to show what he is about to do, puts his fingers to the man's ears and mouth and looks up to heaven to demonstrate where the healing comes from.

The crowd were impressed! Their response was 'He has done everything well!'

## Another Catering Challenge (8:1-10)

We have so far seen the sensitivity of Jesus in dealing with a deaf and dumb man, now we see something of his compassion when faced with a crowd who seemingly won't go home and find something to eat! Again we're in Gentile territory, with Mark maybe hinting to his readers that Jesus had a wider mission than that of simply being a Jewish Messiah.

Jesus feeding a crowd again (the first time was in 6:30-44), and though some insist that the two instances are in fact one, there are differences, and it makes little sense for Mark to include the same story twice in such a concise and quick moving story. There has to be a spiritual lesson here.

There is actually an unfinished story from Chapter 5:1-20 where the demoniac who was healed by Jesus 'went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him...'. The people, we are told, were amazed. Was this poor man, so grateful for healing, in fact the very first missionary among the Gentiles of that area? It might explain why the large crowd gathered around Jesus seem reluctant to leave!

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## Opposition (8:11-13)

Inevitably the Pharisees come out of the woodwork. The healing of a blind and dumb man, the feeding of 4000 people with nothing more than a picnic, these were not proof enough of Jesus' identity for them. The Pharisees wanted something special, signs in the sky, an apocalyptic event.

Do you sense Jesus' frustration? If they were blind to the reality of God's presence in the world, walking among them, healing, teaching and demonstrating his love, then even signs in the heavens would not soften their hearts of stone.

One of the defining qualities of the early Celtic Church in Britain was an ability to discern God's hand and presence in all aspects of the world in which they lived and worked. Elizabeth Browning picked up this theme in one of her poems:

“Earth's crammed with heaven  
And every common bush afire with God;  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.”  
(words from "Aurora Leigh")

So the journey continues, but there's still a problem with food rations (8:14-21), which leads to a cryptic piece of teaching from Jesus. The disciples were talking about physical bread, but Jesus was thinking of something deeper – of the Pharisees and their demands for a sign, of Herod's paranoia (see 6:14ff) and their own failure to see who he was. Jesus refers again to Isaiah 6:9-10 which talks of having eyes and failing to see, and ears and failing to hear. Why are they still worried about their minor physical needs when they know that Jesus supplies so much more?

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## Seeing More Clearly (8:22-26)

So Mark, having in this short section already included the man who could not hear, now presents us with one who could not see. Is he trying to emphasise Jesus' words about seeing, hearing and believing with these particular healing miracles?

At this time eye problems would have been relatively common, as there was little to no appreciation of the importance of cleanliness. Once again we see Jesus' sensitivity in taking the man aside so that the restoration of his sight would not cause too much of a shock. It's the little details that Mark brings, based probably on the eyewitness account of Peter that make these stories come alive.

Jesus also uses the methods that were familiar, rather than simply touching and healing. Spittle was considered to possess healing properties.

He looked up and said, 'I see people; they look like trees walking around.'  
Mark 8:24

This healing is slightly different in that it happened gradually. It's very tempting to think that Mark placed it here because shortly afterwards we find Peter's eyes finally open to the real nature of Jesus (8:29).

Up to now the disciples have only been seeing the truth dimly, as this man at first discerned people as 'trees walking'. Their eyes were not yet fully opened. Is Mark perhaps challenging his readers to examine their own lives by the way he presents the story – to admit that they too have been deaf and blind to the Truth, or perceiving it only dimly as through a mist?



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## Discussion Starter

In past days people tended to stay in one place for many years. Over the last 50 years or so the trend has been to move around more, either with work or family commitments, losing touch with our roots. Can the group think of the positive and negatives in each of these scenarios, and perhaps share any experiences from their own lives that stand out in their memory.

## Questions for Discussion

- 1 Jesus needed space, perhaps to refocus and take time in conversation with his Father. How conscious are we of the need to take time out with God?
- 2 How much time do we spend reading the Bible and Christian books to learn more about Jesus?
- 3 What does Jesus' way of dealing with people tell us about how we should train volunteers for mission?
- 4 Do we suffer from any opposition to our faith? Do the arguments of atheists challenge what we believe, and if so what do we do about it?
- 5 Are we sure of what we believe or are we like the blind man, still seeing things dimly? What does this story (8:22-25) tell us?
- 6 Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote of 'Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God...' How do you understand this thought?



Father, we are so hesitant  
in asking for healing,  
real physical healing.  
So hesitant in asking  
your Spirit to touch our lives.  
It is almost as if we are afraid  
that in hoping for a trickle,  
we unleash a torrent.  
Forgive our timidity, Father,  
our lack of faith  
in the Creator of this universe.  
Forgive our unbelief,  
as we take your Word,  
apply it to our hearts,  
open the floodgates,  
and anticipate a deluge.