

Mark 8:10–21 — Do Ye Not Yet Remember?

Signs Refused, the One Loaf, Leaven of the Pharisees, and the Lord's Searching Questions

Scripture Reading: Mark 8:10–21

“And straightway he entered into a ship with his disciples, and came into the parts of Dalmanutha. And the Pharisees came forth, and began to question with him, seeking of him a sign from heaven, tempting him.

And he sighed deeply in his spirit, and saith, Why doth this generation seek after a sign? verily I say unto you, There shall no sign be given unto this generation. And he left them, and entering into the ship again departed to the other side.

Now the disciples had forgotten to take bread, neither had they in the ship with them more than one loaf. And he charged them, saying, Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod.

And they reasoned among themselves, saying, It is because we have no bread. Which when Jesus knew, he saith unto them, Why reason ye, because ye have no bread? perceive ye not yet, neither understand? have ye your heart yet hardened?

Having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not? and do ye not remember? When I brake the five loaves among five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? They say unto him, Twelve.

And when the seven among four thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? And they said, Seven. And he said unto them, How is it that ye do not understand?”

Mark's Gospel: Immediately

The word immediately — or straightway — appears with remarkable frequency in Mark's Gospel. This is the gospel that sets forth the Lord Jesus as the perfect servant of God, the one who came down from heaven to do the will of the Father and never deviated from it. In a gospel about the perfect servant, things happen immediately. There are no long delays, no taking-time-off, no gradual getting around to the next thing. He goes from one occasion of showing the love of God to another without pause. If the account were of an ordinary man, it would read: he did something, then he took six weeks off, then he got around to the next thing. Not so with the blessed Saviour who always did the Father's will.

Luke's Gospel, by contrast, announces at the outset (1:3) that it is written “with method” — a deliberate notice to the reader that there is an organizing principle at work, different from mere chronology. Luke sets forth the Lord in the perfection of his manhood, and the announcement of method is itself a human touch — the author meeting the reader on the human level. John does not make any such announcement because his subject is divine: the Word made flesh, the glory of God come down, and the account begins there and stays there. Mark's Gospel, with its constant immediacy, is the most chronological of the four — the sequence is real, not merely thematic.

A Private Section: Mark 7:24 – 8:26

Beginning at Mark 7:24, there is a group of incidents that share a common character: the Lord working privately, away from the crowd. “He entered into a house and would have no man know it” (7:24). He took the deaf man aside from the multitude (7:33). In chapter 8 the feeding of the four thousand takes place away from the demanding Pharisees; the passage we are reading finds the Lord in the ship with his disciples alone; and in 8:23 he takes the blind man by the hand and leads him out of the town before healing him. Through this whole section

there is one consistent note: the Lord dealing privately, without spectacle, with no crowd gawking.

This is not the whole of his work — Mark's Gospel also records healings before great multitudes. But the private work is real and ought not to be despised. When the Lord deals with a soul privately, right in the heart, there is no escaping and saying "God isn't watching me" — he is right there. The work he does then is real, because he has done it. It is not the semi-entertainment of a staged healing with a spotlight and an audience; it is the Lord himself with one person, doing something that is good because he has done it.

The Pharisees' Sign and the Sigh

The Pharisees came seeking a sign from heaven. The Lord sighed deeply in his spirit and refused: there shall no sign be given to this generation. This refusal connects directly with the private nature of the preceding feeding of the four thousand. If that miracle had been a public sign — something to advertise, to put on a billboard, to display before the Pharisees — the Lord would have had every opportunity to point to it. He did not. The Lord knew their hearts: no sign would satisfy them. A person who desires a sign for the purpose of having something with which to answer challengers, or to justify a religious opinion, has already put the sign in the wrong place. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. The sign that the Pharisees were seeking was not going to produce faith because they would not hear.

The Lord's response to the rich man's request in the parable — that Lazarus be sent to his brothers — is similar: "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead" (Luke 16:31). The sign-seeking heart is the same in every generation. What is needed is not more evidence but a new nature and a soft conscience.

Not What They Had Forgotten, but Whom They Had Forgotten

The disciples had forgotten to bring bread and had only one loaf in the ship. The Lord warned them about the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod, and they immediately reasoned: it is because we have no bread. This passage is directly analogous to Luke 22, where the Lord spoke about selling a garment and buying a sword and the disciples rummaged for literal swords. In both cases the disciples heard the Lord's words and landed them on a literal, earthly level. In both cases the Lord's actual subject was something entirely different.

The Lord's question cuts to the heart of the problem: "Do ye not remember?" The issue is not what they had forgotten to bring — it is who they had forgotten. He sets his own person before them: "When I brake the five loaves among five thousand... and when the seven among four thousand..." I. He was the center of both those incidents. If any one of those disciples had forgotten every detail of the miracles but had only remembered that this person — the Lord Jesus Christ — was with them in the ship, he would have known at once that the Lord was not speaking a word of regret about the forgotten bread. With this person present, there was nothing to worry about regarding bread. But they had forgotten him, not the bread.

The One Loaf

There is a depth in the detail that they had not more than one loaf. First Corinthians 10:16–17 gives it: "The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread — one loaf — for we are all partakers of that one loaf." The Lord's supper as the apostle Paul describes it has one loaf; all who partake, wherever they may be gathered, are partakers of that one loaf. An assembly in Corinth and an assembly in Ephesus, each breaking bread on the Lord's day morning, with Paul writing to Corinth from Ephesus — how many loaves were broken? Not more than one,

because there is one body and one bread that speaks of it.

This verse in Mark has nothing to do with the Lord's supper in its immediate context — it is simply an account of what was in the ship that day. But the word of God hangs together and forms a whole of truth. A soul willing to submit to it will find that they had not more than one loaf is a cause for thanksgiving rather than disappointment. The proliferation of wafers — one little wafer for every little person — contradicts the teaching of 1 Corinthians 10. The one loaf in Mark's Gospel, read together with the one bread of 1 Corinthians 10, teaches the oneness of the body of Christ and the right ground of gathering.

Leaven: Of the Pharisees and of Herod

Leaven in Scripture is always an emblem of evil — insidious, growing, not static. Its action is stopped only by fire, which speaks of judgment. The Lord identifies two leavens: that of the Pharisees and that of Herod. Leaven works secretly and spreads from within; it does not announce itself.

The leaven of the Pharisees has at its root the confidence that the first man can please God — that careful observance of religious duty, proper tithing, hand-washing, the whole apparatus of outward religious performance, can produce a standing before God. This is the basis of clericalism as well: it looks to one first man, appointed and anointed, to meet the spiritual needs of the people, rather than looking directly to God and to the Holy Spirit. The Pharisees were quick to condemn the Lord precisely because he threatened that whole system. They judged the first man to be competent; the gospel declares him to be ruined and in need of new birth.

The leaven of Herod is worldliness. Herod was of the line of Esau, the man who despised his birthright — who set the things of God at nothing for the sake of the immediate gratification of the flesh. The leaven of Herod draws the heart away from Christ by appealing to what is seen and felt and enjoyed in this present

world. Both leavens work against having Christ alone as the object: the Pharisees supplant him with religious performance; Herod supplants him with the world. Both are under the guise of something that appears, at least on the surface, to be acceptable.

Why Reason Ye? The Lord's Six Questions

The Lord asks a remarkable series of questions in verses 17–21. Why reason ye? Perceive ye not yet? Neither understand? Have ye your heart yet hardened? Having eyes, see ye not? Having ears, hear ye not? And do ye not remember? These six questions catalogue the conditions that make a man unable to receive and act on what the Lord says.

Faith is not unreasonable — that is worth stating clearly. But faith is not arrived at by a process of reason. You cannot reason your way to faith; faith believes God, and it is not the same thing as logic. The question why reason ye is not a condemnation of the mind; the disciples had minds and the Lord knew it. The question is whether this is a moment for reason or a moment for faith. It was a moment for faith, and they chose reason instead.

The hardening of the heart is the most serious of the conditions named. One can have perception problems and still be reached; one can fail to understand and still be taught. But a hardened heart resists all of it — perceiving, not understanding; understanding, not agreeing; agreeing, not acting. It is possible, in the worst case, to have all three at once: cannot perceive, cannot understand, and would not act even if one could. The lesson of this passage is that there is nothing too hard for the Lord Jesus. He is able to deal with every one of these conditions. That is his business. And he does remarkably well at it — not by improving or working upon the first man, but by giving a new nature altogether.

The leaven of the Pharisees was the confidence in the first man. In verses 17–18, the Lord is cataloguing the first man's failures: he cannot perceive, cannot

understand, has a hard heart, has eyes that do not see, has ears that do not hear, and has a mind that cannot remember. This is the state of the first man with respect to spiritual things. These are the very failures that the leaven of the Pharisees denies — and the leaven of Herod evades by distracting him from the question altogether. Both are deadly.

Do ye not remember? It is not what they had forgotten, but whom.