Mark - Commentaries by William Woldridge Fereday

Our Lord's Miracles and Parables, Mark 8:22-26: Men as Trees Walking

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OUR Lord on one occasion performed a miracle in two parts. The scene was Bethsaida; its record is found in Mark 8:22-26, the other Evangelists being silent as to it. A blind man being brought to Him, the Saviour led him out of the town, and spat upon his eyes; then, putting His hands upon him, He inquired if he saw anything. The man replied: “I see men as trees walking.”, The Great Healer touched him a second time, after which he looked up and saw all things clearly. He was then dismissed to his home.

The line pursued by our Lord in this instance was very singular, and its lessons are of an unusual kind. The partial sight of this man represented the spiritual condition of the disciples while the Saviour was with them. They but dimly perceived the true character of His gracious mission. They sincerely believed that He was the long-expected Messiah, Who should sit upon David’s throne; but that He must needs suffer and be made an offering for sin had no place whatever in their thoughts. They clearly understood that such a chapter as Psa. 72, with its kingdom-glories, had reference to Him, but it never dawned upon them that Isa. 53, with its predictions of suffering and shame, must also find its fulfillment in Him. His post-resurrection conversation on the way to Emmaus cleared away many difficulties for those to whom it was addressed: “Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into His glory?” (Luke 24:26). His visit to Jerusalem later in the same day dissipated the perplexities of others. “He, opened their understanding, that they might understand the Scriptures, and said unto them: ‘Thus it is written, and thus it behooved the Christ to suffer; and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations’” (Luke 24:45-47). Henceforward these men were mighty witnesses to a crucified Saviour, while looking and waiting for His return from heaven as a glorious King.

Many true-hearted believers to-day are as imperfect in their spiritual vision as the disciples of long ago. So to speak, they “see men as trees walking.” Very few things are clear to them. For example, many fear that though they are children of God by faith in Christ Jesus they may ultimately find themselves rejected, failing to understand that there is no condemnation for those whom divine grace has identified with Christ. They are apprehensive that the gift of the Holy Spirit may be withdrawn from them, not perceiving that this priceless bestowal is due to the Saviour’s blood, which makes it secure forever. They imagine that every time the Christian fails he needs a fresh cleansing in the atoning blood, their faith not having grasped that the Christian is judicially clean forever, needing nothing for daily failures but the water of the Word of God. They are fearful concerning the coming of the Lord Jesus lest they should then be left behind, not having learned that our translation to glory is the fruit of sovereign grace alone, which can never fail. Oh, that all these would go aside once more with the Saviour and get another touch from His blessed hand, as the poor man of Bethsaida. They would then read spiritual things in God’s own light, and their joy would be full forever.

Our Lord's Miracles and Parables, Mark 7:31-37: Ephphatha

MARK tells us that after His special journey into the neighborhood of Tyre and Sidon for the healing of the Syrophœnician, the Saviour made a circuit of the Decapolis district. This consisted of ten cities which had been granted special privileges by the Roman conquerors about a century earlier. There, as everywhere else, He found abundant need for the exercise of His divine power and mercy. A man was brought to Him who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech (Mark 7:31-37); a humiliating picture of every man’s moral and spiritual condition as the fruit of the Fall. God lost man’s ear in the garden; ever since that fatal day the disposition of the whole human family has been to listen to anyone rather than to God. Hence the exhortation to the chosen people: “Hear, O Israel” (Deut. 6:4), and the divine lamentation: “Oh, that My people had hearkened unto Me” (Psa. 81:13). Hence, too, the appeal to us all: “To-day, if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts” (Heb. 3:7). The tongue of the unregenerate man is as estranged from God as the ear; for none can deny that the most eloquent conversationalist betrays an impediment in his speech as soon as the things of God and Christ are introduced.

The Saviour took the sufferer aside from the crowd. It is good to be alone in the divine presence. The busy hum of the world is not conducive to spiritual reflection. The great destroyer of souls would rather keep men in a continuous whirl of business and pleasure than see them sitting down quietly in meditation before God. But it is in the hush of the divine presence that we learn our sin and guilt, and our deep need of sovereign grace. There, apart from the thoughtless, clamorous crowd, we see things in their true light, and our souls find eternal blessing.

The Saviour touched first the ears of the afflicted one, and then his tongue. This order is significant. In the spiritual realm the ear must be opened to receive divine instruction ere the tongue is able to speak forth God’s praise. “We believe, and therefore speak” (2 Cor. 4:13). “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God” (Rom. 10:17). He who has received by way of the ear the Gospel of Christ into His heart will delight to speak of the marvels of God’s grace to all around.

As He touched the man the Lord looked up to heaven, and sighed, saying, “Ephphatha,” that is “Be opened.” The burden of the world’s sin, and the many miseries attendant upon it, oppressed His gracious spirit. He recalled the day when, ages before, He pronounced His whole creative work “very good” (Gen. 1:31), and He groaned as He considered all the havoc that Satan and man had caused through sin. It was this that brought Him from above. But He had come, not to heal physical diseases only, but to make atonement for sin by His blood, in order that all who believe might be delivered once and forever from the guilt and thraldom of sin and be reconciled to God in peace and blessing.

The astonished multitudes who beheld the present miracle exclaimed, “He hath done all things well.” With what fullness of meaning may this be said when the new heavens and the new earth appear, peopled by countless myriads of the blest, saved from sin, suffering, and death as the fruit of His priceless sacrifice.

WHEN our Lord first left Nazareth to live at Capernaum He was met with an extraordinary experience in that little port. According to His custom, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, His disciples attending Him. His exposition of the Scriptures was interrupted by a demon-possessed man crying out: “What have we to do with Thee, Thou Jesus of Nazareth? Art Thou come to destroy us? I know Thee who Thou art, the Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24). To be confronted in such a place with the power of Satan was surely very remarkable. The Saviour frequently met demoniacs in the outside world, thus being painfully reminded that the world is under Satan as its prince; but that a demon should intrude, as it were, into the very presence of God was extraordinary. The demon knew Him, and did not hesitate to confess Him as the Holy One, a title long before assigned to Him in Psalms 89:19. But the Lord could no more receive testimony from such a source than Paul later, when publicly witnessed to by a Pythoness in the streets of Philippi (Acts 16:16-18). Between Christ and Satan there can be no affinity, but rather the deepest moral antagonism. Accordingly, in the presence of the congregation, the Lord overthrew the power of the enemy, and set his victim free. The people went home marveling both at the teaching they had heard and the power they had witnessed.

Is there anything to-day answering to the demon in the synagogue? Most assuredly, for history is repeating itself continually. The parable of the mustard-seed comes to mind in this connection. The Lord likened the profession of Christianity to the least of all seeds, which developed to such proportions that it provided a lodging-place for the birds of the air. Now seeing that in the course of the same exposition He used the birds as symbols of the emissaries of Satan (Matt. 13:4,19, 31-32), what have we here but a forecast of Christian profession losing its original humble character, and becoming a great and showy system, with room beneath its shelter for the very enemies of Christ and the Gospel? How sadly this has been verified must be patent to every thoughtful observer. How comes it that in buildings erected for the preaching of the Word of God men are heard discrediting the. Inspiration of the Scriptures, repudiating the possibility of miracles, flouting the Virgin-birth of Christ, speaking disrespectfully of His atoning blood, and spiritualizing away the momentous fact of His resurrection? Comes this kind of thing from the Spirit of Truth, or from some other spirit? Let us not deceive ourselves. There is a working of Satan in Christendom to-day as real and as malignant as in Israel of old. The manner of its manifestation has changed, but that is all. In a polished age men are apt to use mild terms for grave offenses, and thus obscure their real nature and character. It is infinitely wiser and safer to set things in their true light, however hideous they may appear.

None can put down the power of Satan but Him Who cast out the demon in the synagogue of Capernaum. This He will accomplish effectually when He comes out of heaven in power and majesty. Meanwhile, those who fear God are enjoined to have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather to expose them (Eph. 5:11).