

Having fed the Gentile crowd of 4000 men plus women and children Jesus enters a ship and departs Decapolis southwest of the Sea of Galilee and returns to Dalmanutha apparently near Magdala on the west coast. Immediately He is again confronted by antagonistic religious opponents. They had first condemned His disciples for "working" on the Sabbath. Next they had objected to the disciples not ritually washing their hands before they ate. Now, back from a little change of scenery, Jesus finds they are right there with another more aggressive challenge to His preaching. They demand a sign. Their demand was really a sign of their profound unbelief and rejection of all the signs already given. Were they demanding some supernatural Old Testament fireworks to prove He was a bona fide prophet authorized by God Himself? Hadn't He done enough? They get not another sign, but another sigh. A groan. He had come to His land desiring its occupants believe and receive Him. How frustrating for Him. He, by God's grace, did not punish them at that point. He abruptly left there without allowing Himself to be drawn into a contest to validate His authority. He had already more than proven that.

He goes by boat to the north coast, to Bethsaida, a gentile city situated by the entrance of the Jordan into the Sea of Galilee from the north. On the way He warns His disciples of the leaven of the Pharisees and that of Herod. They don't get it. He explains it. (Leaven, as always in scripture, speaks of sin.) We learn elsewhere in the case of the Pharisees it was spiritual hypocrisy, a vain show of religious piety, feeding their own pride and seeking the admiration of men. In the case of the Herodians it was a worldly focus upon power over men through the authority and control that comes with political connections in government. Believers are drawn away from the crucified and ascended Christ by the same leaven today. Yes, beware indeed!

The disciples had forgotten to take bread with them on the boat. Why? How could they forget food? Their forgetfulness wasn't because they believed He would miraculously feed them. He had to remind them of that and of the left overs they had collected and left behind. He asks if "ye still have your heart hardened?" He addresses them as a group of individuals united by each having a hardened heart. The Lord values unity among His disciples, but not this way. Their eyes were not seeing and ears not hearing as they should. He opened them, precisely recounting His feeding of well over 20,000 people counting women and children. They later had well remembered His rebuke when telling their experiences to Mark. They were honest when looking back, acknowledging the hardness of their heart at the

time, even though it must have been embarrassing to mention it. This shows the inspiration of the scriptures, for the natural man wants to leave a legacy without the warts. How could they have a hardened heart? Well, don't we sometimes "get used to" the story of the cross? Yes, we can. We become just like those who were earthly companions of the very Son of God. Are we sometimes apt to treat these stories we've heard from childhood as old stuff? Do we read an interesting story in a tract or Sunday School paper and skip over the scriptures quoted tuning out the "commercial"? Do we get used to remembering the Lord in breaking of bread? Has it become an empty routine? If so, our hearts have become hardened. How refreshing and infectious is the joy a new believer finds in the word of God. Don't we want that again? There are plenty of "leftovers" from this feast for all.

While in Bethsaida they bring a blind man to be healed, the first mentioned in the gospels? As with the deaf and dumb man in Decapolis Jesus uses more than just a word to heal him. Were Jesus' powers waning? Was the fountain of blessing running low? Not! But His liberty to work in a place seemed to be influenced by the spiritual conditions in that community. This is true today as well in His Assembly. In Galilee the atmosphere surrounding His public witness and work was becoming increasingly antagonistic. They ask Him to touch him. He goes further, using saliva to grant eyesight. He first takes the blind man apart from the crowd. Earlier when He had returned to formerly antagonistic Gentile Decapolis He had maintained a reserve. He took the man aside and then used physical means (saliva and fingers) to accompany His healing words. In both cases He did things to heal, not simply speaking the word. But even this reserve was a blessing in grace. This assured any weak in faith that He indeed was the One that was healing, not simply a response of a sovereign God to a silent prayer of Jesus. So we learn it is He that still heals today, even though He will often work through earthly means such as skilled doctors, surgeons, medicines and tender human care. There is a sweet intimacy in His using His saliva and His hands to heal. We might well meditate upon this. Yet His enemies later spit on Him in derision.

The graded steps of return of sight in the man at Dalmanutha contrasts with the instant restoration of hearing and speaking in Deacapolis. Jesus finishes the job both places. But In Galilee spiritual blindness was spreading over the land. He admonished the healed man to go to his own house and to keep his healing secret in town.

Jesus again leaves. This time to another gentile city,

Caesarea Philippi near the Jordan River north of Galilee. It was the capitol city of Herod Philip who reigned over the Roman territory just north and east of Galilee. (It was a different place than Caesarea, mentioned in the Acts, which was on the Mediterranean coast.) On the way there He asked His disciples, "Whom do men say that I am?" The sad answer was nobody seemed to grasp Who He Was. The people granted Jesus an esteemed place among their prophets, recent and past (John the Baptist and Elijah). Men do that today too. They will not acknowledge Jesus as God or as the eternal Son, Muslims, Jehovah Witnesses, Mormons, and numbers of so called "Christian" denominations as well. Great prophet to be heeded? yes, but not the Eternal Son of God. To say that would make them too responsible to Him. Pride can't bear that.

But the disciples did believe and know who He was. Peter answers for them. "Thou art the Christ." Yes, that is who He was. Matthew (16:19) recounts more that was said by Jesus on this occasion regarding the Kingdom and the Church. But Mark by the Spirit is content to focus on the immense central truth: Jesus is the Christ. The Jewish Messiah. The Eternal Chosen, Appointed, Anointed One, Proverbs 8:23. He tells them to tell no one, just as He had told the blind man He healed. Why? Because it was too late. The destiny and doom of that generation was irretrievably set. To preach Jesus is the Christ would only inflame the hatred of His enemies and increase the urgency of their having to do something about Him. He faithfully tells the disciples, for the first time, of His impending sufferings, national and religious rejection, His being killed, ... and His resurrection after three days. Incomprehensible! He, the Christ, die? It was indeed clearly written in the Prophets for all to see. But they all overlooked it in their desire for deliverance from Roman domination and

for peace in their land. Even the disciples. Well meaning Peter, again speaking for them all, began to rebuke the Lord. How he loved Him! How he wanted to spare Him any suffering. Later he boasted he would die for the Lord.. But rebuke the Lord? A mere man rebuke the Christ? What a dramatic moment. The Lord turned, and looked upon the disciples. Then He spoke. "Get the behind me Satan." Shocking! Why so harsh? The Lord rebukes Peter in the strongest way. Peter's sentiments were directly opposed to the very reason the Lord had come from glory. Peter's statement was as real a temptation as what the devil himself had presented the Lord in the wilderness. Was this a crisis? Was there danger the Lord would decide it wasn't worth it? Could He decide to abort His divinely appointed mission to redeem the earth? Would He wrest it and its lost sinners from Satan's clutches? Could He back off in response to Peter's emotional plea? No way! He and the Father had planned this before the foundation of the world. But that didn't stop Satan's attempts to derail it. He never gives up, even though defeated now. How often we savor the things of men, not the things of God. Momentary blessings even in those freely given of God may cause us to lose our perspective regarding the things that really count. I recall as a little boy wishing Jesus would have destroyed all those awful men that opposed Him. My Super Hero! He would show them! I little realized my eternal destiny hung in the balance of what He had decided at this crucial point in His life. Yet the outcome was never in question, He would resolutely go on to the horrible death of the cross to save me. And Peter. And YOU! And all who will believe and receive Him. And in His own time He will judge the earth and those who reject Him. Three of the disciples would soon witness a foretaste of that glory.

By Ron Canner, February 21, 2007