

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #146:

TWO UNUSUAL HEALINGS OF JESUS

By John Temples

Mark 7 and 8 record two of the most interesting miracles of Jesus, the first involving a deaf man and the second a blind man. Here is Mark 7:31-34:

“Again, departing from the region of Tyre and Sidon, He came through the midst of the region of Decapolis to the Sea of Galilee. Then they brought to Him one who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech, and they begged Him to put His hand on him. And He took him aside from the multitude, and put His fingers in his ears, and He spat and touched his tongue. Then, looking up to heaven, He sighed, and said to him, ‘Ephphatha,’ that is, ‘Be opened.’”

The particular case Mark relates here involved a man who was both deaf and had difficulty speaking. Jesus healed him in a very unusual way. The commentators are puzzled by the procedure Jesus followed here, and no doubt we can also wonder why He did what He did. Why did the Lord use spit to heal?

The Enduring Word Commentary has this attempted explanation: “Jesus used a curious manner in healing this man. Throughout His ministry, Jesus used many different ways of healing. He healed with a word, healed without a word, healed in response to one’s faith, healed in response to the faith of another, healed those who asked, and healed those He approached. Jesus didn’t want to be tied down to any ‘one method’ to show that His power was not dependent on any method but on the sovereign power of God.”

But why in the world would Jesus put His fingers in the man’s ears and spit, then touch the man’s tongue with the spit? Here is a possible explanation:

Remember, this man could barely speak and could not hear at all; so he had no idea who Jesus was or what He was about to do. Since he could not hear encouragement, it had to come through a compassionate touch. So Jesus *pantomimed* to the man what He was going to do! He touched the man’s ears (signifying to him “I’m about to open your ears”) and touched his tongue (meaning “I’m also going to free your tongue to speak plainly”). By this time, He certainly had the deaf man’s undivided attention! Next, the Lord did three things:

1. He “looked up to heaven,” another pantomime signal to the man that what would happen next would come by the power of God in heaven.
2. “He sighed” (some versions say He groaned). This could have been an expression of sorrow at the plight of the man (like His weeping at the tomb of Lazarus), or it could signify the utterance of an earnest prayer.
3. He then said one word: “Ephphatha.”

“Ephphatha” is an Aramaic word. Aramaic (Syriac) was the language of the common Jews in Jesus’s day. “Ephphatha” means “be opened” or “be opened completely.” But remember, the deaf man could not hear Jesus speak the word. But I’ll bet he could read lips, and imagine what he thought when he saw Jesus mouth the words “Be opened”!

So the touching of the ears and the spit on the tongue had nothing to do with the healing--they were not part of some mystical/magical “ceremony” or ritual--but were designed to communicate to the man by sign language what Jesus was going to do for him.

The result is recorded in verses 35-37:

“Immediately his ears were opened, and the impediment of his tongue was loosed, and he spoke plainly. Then He commanded them that they should tell no one; but the more He commanded them, the more widely they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done all things well. He makes both the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.’”

Jesus's miracle left the people overwhelmed with amazement. He commanded them not to spread the news of it, because He did not want to be revealed fully as the Messiah until the proper time. But of course, the people immediately disobeyed Him.

A SIMILAR PUZZLING HEALING: MARK 8:22-26

“Then He came to Bethsaida; and they brought a blind man to Him, and begged Him to touch him. So He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town. And when He had spit on his eyes and put His hands on him, He asked him if he saw anything. And he looked up and said, ‘I see men like trees, walking.’ Then He put His hands on his eyes again and made him look up. And he was

restored and saw everyone clearly. Then He sent him away to his house, saying, 'Neither go into the town, nor tell anyone in the town.'"

Several things about this miracle are curious. For one thing, Jesus led the blind man away from town to heal him. We don't know exactly why, but it might have something to do with the obstinacy of the people. Bethsaida was one of the cities Jesus denounced for their stubbornness and unbelief.

From the preceptaustin website: "The residents of Bethsaida had no excuse for their unbelief. They had witnessed many miracles, yet they refused to repent (Matt. 11:20–24)... By escorting the man outside of the town, and by denying him the opportunity to go back and proclaim what happened, Jesus confirmed the permanence of Bethsaida's unbelief and His own judgment. Like the Pharisees whom Jesus confronted earlier (Mark 8:11–13), the residents of Bethsaida were sentenced to eternal spiritual blindness."

Another unusual feature of this miracle is Jesus's use of saliva. Verse 23 says Jesus spit on his eyes and put His hands on him.

Some commentators say that this was necessary because the man's eyelids were fused shut(!), or some other silly reason. But remember when Jesus healed the deaf and mute man in chapter 7, He did a similar thing: He put His fingers in the man's ears and touched the man's tongue with spit. We said the reason for that was to make the deaf man understand what Jesus was going to do--heal his deafness and defective speech. Same thing here, in my view. Jesus puts spit on the man's eyes to let Him know that something is about to happen to his eyes: they are going to be opened.

The results are stated in verses 23b-25: "And when He had spit on his eyes and put His hands on him, He asked him if he saw anything. And he looked up and said, 'I see men like trees, walking.' Then He put His hands on his eyes again and made him look up. And he was restored and saw everyone clearly."

Note the order of events: (1) Jesus put spit on the man's eyes. (2) Jesus asked him what he saw. (3) The man said he could see men, but not clearly. (Incidentally, this lets us know the man's blindness was not congenital--he had been able to see

at some time previously.) (4) Jesus put His hands on the man again and he could see clearly.

Here again, the commentators say that Jesus did a “gradual” miracle instead of an instant one, or, even farther from the truth, that it took Jesus two tries to heal the man. Nonsense! It’s obvious that the reason the man could not see clearly the first time was because there was spit in his eyes! As soon as Jesus touched him, his eyes were fine--they were healed--but it just took a moment for his eyes to clear up.

Make a note in your Bible next to these passages: Jesus used spit and touch to convey to the men involved what He was going to do. --John Temples