

FOLLOW ME

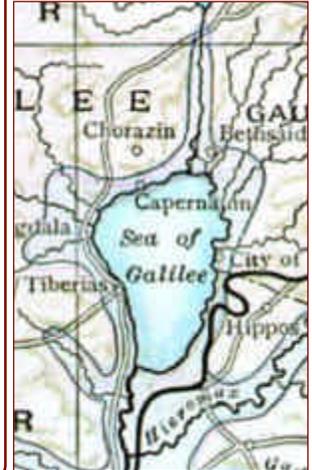
LESSON ELEVEN: THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MARK 8



FAST FACTS

- Jesus miraculously fed a crowd of 4,000 people, with His Disciples collecting seven baskets of leftovers.
- The Pharisees demanded that Jesus provide a miraculous “sign from heaven” to prove His identity, but Jesus refused.
- Jesus healed a blind man in two stages, twice putting His hands on the man’s eyes.
- Jesus asked who people thought Him to be; the Disciples responded some thought Him to be St. John the Baptist, and others Elijah.
- The Holy Apostle Peter proclaimed that Jesus is the Christ.
- Jesus foretold His Passion, and said that His followers must also carry a cross in their lives.

MAP



MARK 8:1-21

Chapter eight begins with Jesus feeding a crowd of four thousand people. Some scholars believe St. Mark is simply retelling the story of the feeding of five thousand (Mark 6:30-44). They base this on several similarities between the stories: the feedings took place in an isolated location; both crowds were fed bread and fish; and Jesus said a prayer of thanksgiving on both occasions. There are, however, several important differences which show that these are two different occasions (in addition to the fact that, in verses 19-20, Jesus Himself refers to the two separate occasions):

MARK 6:30-44

- The crowd was largely Jewish
- The Disciples brought the crowd to Jesus’ attention
- The crowd was with Jesus for one day
- There were 5,000 people
- The crowd carried five loaves of bread, and two fish
- The Disciples used twelve small baskets

MARK 8:1-10

- The crowd was largely composed of Gentiles
- Jesus remarked upon the crowd’s need for food
- The crowd followed Jesus for several days
- There were 4,000 people
- The crowd carried seven loaves of bread, and an unspecified number of fish
- The Disciples used seven large baskets

This miracle, like the earlier feeding of the 5,000, demonstrates that Jesus, the divine Messiah, has the ability — and willingness — to provide for all the needs of His people (Jesus alludes to this point in verses 17-21 when He rebuked the Disciples for worrying about their food supply). There is another very important point, however, to be understood from the fact that the two feedings were of Jewish *and* Gentile crowds. Fr. Paul Tarazi explains that these passages demonstrate that Communion with Christ is open to all races and ethnic groups because “there is no longer a difference between Jew and Gentile. Indeed, ‘there is no longer Jew nor Greek’ (Galatians 3:26-29) in the Messianic community of the risen Christ.”

LOOK AT YOURSELF

St. John Chrysostom comments on the Pharisees’ demand for a “sign from heaven:” “But for what sign from heaven were they asking? Maybe that he should hold back the sun, or curb the moon, or bring down thunderbolts, or change the direction of the wind, or something like that...But for one who comes among friends, there should be no need of such signs.”

We, too, can be guilty of demanding signs from Jesus. Many people say that they will believe in God only if He gives them some miraculous, unmistakable evidence of His existence and desire for their worship. If He answered every such demand, God would no longer be all-powerful: He would instead be under *our* control.

Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow taught in the nineteenth century that we experience a miracle each time we participate in the Mysteries of the Church.

MARK 8:22-26

A crucial difference between Jesus' healing of the blind man in this passage, and His other miraculous healings, is that this healing took place in *stages*: instead of completely healing the man at once, Jesus gradually improved the man's eyesight. The *Orthodox Study Bible* tells us the reason: "This man is healed in stages, just as our ability to know God grows gradually." Blessed Theophylact further links knowledge and faith to healing itself: "The blind man himself did not have perfect faith, which is why the Lord does not at once make him to see clearly, but only in part, as his faith was only in part. For healing occurs according to one's faith" (see Matthew 9:29).

MARK 8:27-38

Jesus asked the Disciples many questions to make them think about themselves and what they believed. No question was more important than these: "Who do men say that I am," and "Who do *you* say that I am" (vv. 27-30)? The Disciples responded that some people thought He was the resurrected St. John the Baptist (even Herod thought this; see Matthew 14:2), while others thought He was Elijah (see also Luke 9:18-20). It was St. Peter who emphatically claimed that Jesus is the Messiah.

With this declaration of His divine identity, Jesus began to prophesy to the Disciples His coming Crucifixion and Resurrection. St. Peter, who had just proclaimed Jesus' identity, then argued that He didn't need to suffer these things. Blessed Theophylact explains that Jesus called St. Peter "Satan" because "Peter had Satan's thoughts, not wanting Him to suffer, and opposing Him." By trying to convince Jesus to avoid His forthcoming Passion, St. Peter was — even though he had good intentions — presenting to Jesus the same satanic temptation He conquered in the wilderness: to take the easy way out, and thus reject His divine mission.

OUR FAITH TEACHES

There are three spiritual stages that correspond with the progression of the Christian life. The first stage, according to such Church Fathers as St. Niketas, is *purification*; Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos links this stage to those beginning their lives as Christians. Purification is marked by repentance — the Christian works through prayer and fasting, and lifestyle modification, to avoid those things that incite the passions. As Metropolitan Hierotheos states, "By repenting man extinguishes the strength of inborn fire; he silences the mouths of reckless passions — he becomes spiritually strong."

The second stage is *illumination*, which Metropolitan Hierotheos links to those who are in the intermediate stage of the Christian life. Illumination is marked by acquiring knowledge of God and engaging in unceasing prayer of the soul. The importance of illumination in the Orthodox spiritual life can be seen in the many prayers to the Holy Spirit to "illumine our hearts."

The final and perfecting stage of the Christian life is *theosis*. *Theosis* is, in the words of Bishop Kallistos Ware, "The aim of the Christian life." Fotios K. Litsas concisely defines *theosis* as "absolute unity with God" and "unity with God in life." According to Bishop Kallistos, the unity of *theosis* is a process and goal: "If [man] is to be 'perfectly one' with God, this means in effect that man must be 'deified': he is called to become by grace what God is by nature."

LOOK AT YOURSELF

Jesus tells us that His followers must lose their lives for His sake (Mark 8: 34-35). For some this means the martyrdom of physical death for Him. For all Christians, it means many things: dying with Christ - and rising with Him - in the waters of baptism, destroying our passions, and giving our lives completely to God.

Jesus further tells us that we must never be ashamed of Him. Are you proud to be a Christian, or do you hide your faith when being a Christian is unpopular? We must live our lives for the glory of God.

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WHAT DID I LEARN ABOUT FOLLOWING JESUS?

- The Disciples quickly forgot Jesus' past miracles. Do I remember all the things God has done for me, or do I take them for granted?
- Do I demand that God "prove Himself" through signs and

miracles?

- Who do I say Jesus is? Do I know Him as God, or do I think something else about Him?
- What crosses in my life is God calling me to carry?

