

Mark 8:22-26: The Two-fold Miracle
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Among the miracles of healing, the account of the blind man receiving his sight in Mark 8:22-26 is unique. Other miracles of healing were immediate and complete, whereas this one occurred in two phases.

Jesus and His disciples were in Bethsaida. A blind man was brought to Him for healing. Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village. He spit on the blind man's eyes, laid His hands on him, and asked if he saw anything. The man look up and said, 'I see men; for I behold them as trees, walking.' Jesus laid His hands on the man's eyes again and, "he looked steadfastly, and was restored, and saw all things clearly" (Mark 8:25).

Many commentators recognize the uniqueness of this two-phase miracle. What R. C. Sproul writes is typical. He suggests that the first phase left the man with "dim—blurred" vision, but that "Jesus was not finished. He applies a second touch. With the second touch the things that were blurred come into sharp focus. Now the man could distinguish between trees and men"¹ (Playing God, pp. 14-15). R. C. Foster writes, "The man could see, but not distinctly. Then with the second touch and a fixed look by the man, the sight was completely restored" (Studies in the Life of Christ, p. 691)². But why the miracle was performed in two steps commentators, in general, do not speculate, unless they associate it with the speculative doctrine of a "second working of grace".

We have new insights on the phenomenon. The movie *At First Sight* is based on a story told by Dr. Oliver Sacks in his book, *An Anthropologist on Mars*. One of the stories is about a man who lost his sight early in life and underwent a surgical procedure that restored his sight at age fifty. What do you suppose this newly sighted man experienced? Joy? A new lease on life? A new birth of sorts? Five weeks after surgery this man said, "he often felt more disabled than he had felt when he was blind." Dr. Sacks explains, "Steps...posed a special hazard, because all he could see was confusion, a flat surface of parallel and crisscrossing lines, he could not see them (although he knew them) as solid objects going up and coming down in three dimensional space."³

This man's sight had been restored, but he did not know what it was he saw. When people are born blind and have their sight restored later in life, there is something surgery cannot remedy. It cannot give the newly sighted person the ability to conceive that which they perceive. Mortimer J. Adler, in his book, *Intellect: Mind over Matter*, refers to a phenomenon known to neurologists as agnosia. "Agnosia...occurs in individuals whose sensory powers are in no way impaired but who have suddenly become conceptually, not perceptually, blind."⁴

The title of another Oliver Sacks' book is, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. The title tells the story. A man attempted to lift his wife's head up to place on his head, mistaking it for a hat. Dr. Sacks quotes ophthalmologist Albert Valvo on the modern day phenomenon of a blind

¹ R.C. Sproul, *Playing God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Pub., 1988), p. 14-15

² R.C. Foster, *Studies in the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MIL Baker Book House, 1982), p. 691

³ Oliver Sacks, *Anthropologist on Mars* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 120-121

⁴ Mortimer J. Adler, *Intellect: Mind over Matter* (New York, NY: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1990), p. 36-37

person receiving sight through surgery, “In fact, the number of cases of this kind over the last ten centuries known to us is not more than twenty.”⁵

So, what does this have to do with the miracle in Mark 8? In the first phase the blind man receives his sense of sight. In the second phase, Jesus gives the man his conceptual sense of sight. The man Jesus healed saw clearly (perceptually), but he was not quite sure what to make of what he saw (conceptually). This explains how Jesus could heal the man physically, and at the same time, the man express some confusion over what he saw.

A friend of mine taught in a community college on the East Coast. He used an earlier version of this article in a class titled, “Introduction to the Gospel.” A woman in his class, having read the article, said it paralleled her own experience, having been born blind and through corrective surgery received her sight.

Jesus, on other occasions, healed blind people immediately and completely. The account in Mark is the only one in which Jesus heals someone in two phases. If He was able to do it immediately and completely, why did He heal this man in two phases, and what can we learn from it?

(Author’s Note: For those interested in a more thorough treatment, please consult my manuscript in the 17th Annual Shenandoah Lectureship book on Great Questions in the Bible, pps.342-351.)

⁵ Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1998), p. 109