

DISABILITY IN THE GOSPELS AND ACTS

by Edward Orsmond, Simondium



Study 2: The Gospel of Mark.

Jesus' miraculous healings of persons with disability and the ministry of the disciples.

Introduction: The Synoptic Gospels and Acts

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) and Acts contain many stories about the miraculous works of Jesus - stories relating the healing of persons with disabilities. We find these also in the ministry of the disciples. For example, see Acts 3 and Mark 1:40-45. However, the miraculous healings create the impression that these reports in the New Testament imply that disability is something abnormal. Disability is regarded as unwelcome, unnatural and foreign to this world. It should be removed and the sufferers set free.

This type of interpretation and deduction could lead one to the question whether the miraculous healings are really the best approach when we desire a Biblical based understanding of disability. Do the selected Scripture portions help us towards a better understanding of what the Bible says about disability and the human sufferers?

It is easy to conclude that the healing of disability is not the best approach in our quest for a Biblical pronouncement on disability. But then we must be careful because such an approach could lead us to ignore large portions of Scripture and miss out on important perspectives on disability. For example, why did the authors of the Synoptic Gospels and Acts spend so much time and space on the detailed accounts of so many stories on disability? Part of the answer is surely that the Biblical writers thereby acknowledge that disability is part and parcel of our daily lives, yes, even part of God's creation. The Bible does not remain silent on disability and Jesus Himself gives it His full attention. His compassion for the disabled emphasizes God's love for all humanity. Jesus, however, exposes the community's attitude in those years with regard to their attitude towards disabilities. He criticizes their prejudice and selective exclusion of these sufferers.

To understand the stories and examples of healing of disabilities in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, we must also take into account the alternative perspectives on the miraculous healings. For example, Jesus associated with many persons that were *persona non grata* according to the ruling social

norms. He engaged women in conversations, ate with tax collectors and touched people who were regarded as 'unclean'. In His ministry, Jesus emphasizes the inclusion of everybody in God's new World. Another

perspective on the healing of disability comes to the fore reading the stories and examples through the lens of defencelessness and trust. Jesus preached and embraced the attitude of vulnerability and trust in God. He postulated these as important values in God's new World.

A third perspective opens on the stories of disability when seen through the lens of courage. Jesus encourages people to bear up and to persevere in their trust in and following of Him.

A few Bible studies to illustrate the point

In this section, we consider stories in Mark, Matthew and Acts. These are stories about Jesus' miraculous healings, specifically those that apply to people with disabilities. The various stories demonstrate that in each case different motifs play a role. The various motifs eventually provide us with a broader perspective on how the Bible speaks to us on disability. We will consider the following stories:

- Mark 1:40-45
- Mark 8:22-26 and 10:46-52
- Matthew 5 - 10
- Acts 3 – see study 3.

1 Mark 1:40-45 - Healing of a person with leprosy

The Gospel according to Mark can be summarized as follows:

- 1:1-8 Introduction
- 1:9-8:21 Ministry in Galilee
- 8:22-10:52 Teaching about suffering
- 11:1-15:41 Passion history
- 15:42-16:8 The grave and Resurrection reports

This arrangement reveals the two great story blocks in Mark's account of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The first great block is formed by chapters 1:9 - 8:21. Here the focus is on Jesus' ministry in Galilee. The second great block is chapters 11:1-15:41. Here the focus is on the events leading up to Jesus' Passion. Between the two blocks, we find a pivot in Mark 8:31. It is here that Jesus announces for the first time that He must suffer and die.

Mark 1:40-45 is part of the first block (Jesus' ministry in Galilee). We must remember that Mark narrates the story of Jesus as the Son of God (1:11; 9:7; 15:39). Jesus' central message is the advent of God's Kingdom (1:15). The Gospel according to Mark shows with emphasis that the miracles of Jesus are

the breakthrough of God's rule on earth, especially the exorcism. About 47% of the first half of Mark's Gospel is devoted to Jesus' miracles. This illustrates for Mark the breakthrough of God's Kingdom. His miracles announce the start of God's reign and its acknowledgement on earth. This is an important motif for our study.

The person with leprosy's earnest appeal

1.1 Identify the main points of the meeting between Jesus and the person with leprosy.

- The man suffering from leprosy said :“If you are willing, you can make me clean.”
- Jesus answered: “I am willing. Be clean!”
- Two-fold instruction:
 - “Don't tell this to anyone”;
 - “Go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices for your cleansing...”

1.2 Consider the content and meaning of these main points.

Describe the essence of the matter

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1.3 The 'don't tell anyone' command is another important motif in Mark.

It ties in with the question about who Jesus is - to understand Jesus' identity. He doesn't want people believing in Him just because of His miracles. The miracles must not persuade people of His Godliness. Do you find this strange?

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1.4 Complying with the purification instructions is especially important for a person's inclusion in or exclusion from a social or religious community.

The question of in- or exclusion (in other words participation) in a communal system is another important motif for Mark. Jesus restores the leprosy sufferer's social-religious position and his human dignity.

- This is also about social prejudice and Jesus' reversal of social values.
 - Think about these matters and give your honest opinion about them
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1.5 Look once more at our summary of Mark's Gospel.

Remember that this story is part of Jesus' healing miracles and an expression and confirmation of the fact that the Kingdom is near (1:15).

- Here it is also about Jesus' authority and his public ministry.
- The miraculous healings tell us who Jesus is (identity).
- It also proclaims God's will for His new world (Kingdom).

- Express your thoughts on this.

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1.6 Note the result of this incident and the cured man’s joyful spreading of the news.

Jesus could no longer make a public entry to a town. The motif of space and inclusion / exclusion is also applicable to Jesus. He is shut out and indeed threatened.

- The roles have been reversed. The motif of vulnerability now applies to Jesus.
- He is an example of vulnerability.

1.7 Reflect on the theme of disability in this story.

Take into account the various motifs (kingdom, identity, space, community, vulnerability)

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2 Mark 8:22-26 and 10:46-52 - Two healings of blind people

According to the broad summary of the Gospel according to Mark, these two stories are part of Mark's report on Jesus' teaching on suffering on His own *Via Dolorosa*. The Bible presents the story of a person with disability who is cured in the framework of suffering. The suffering theme is central for people with disabilities. The question about disability and suffering is seen in the context of Jesus' suffering and in the light of his followers who believe in Him as Messiah and who wish to serve Him as disciples.

The cross overshadows Mark's Gospel. The suffering of Christ and the persecution of the disciples is already made known in the first scene with the temptation of Jesus in the desert and the imprisonment of John (Mark 1:12-14). The theme of oppression is continued when followers are cautioned to take up their cross and follow Jesus (Mark 8:34); and when first Jesus (Mark 3:19; 9:31; 10:33; 14:41-42; 15:2,10,15) and then His disciples (Mark 13:9, 11, 12) are persecuted.

When we reflect on the two Scripture portions (Mark 8 and 10), there are two ways to approach the matter. We can keep them apart or we can apply the same technique that Mark applied. We can observe how each of the two stories opens its own perspective, but also how they hang together. Seen together they open new perspectives and insights. We will try to apply both approaches. We listen to each separately and we identify the unique motifs it contains. But we also listen how the two stories together introduce new meaning.

2.1 Mark 8:22-26 - Jesus heals a blind man at Bethsaida

2.1.1 Identify the main features of this meeting

- People bring a blind man to Jesus.
- Jesus leads the man out of the town.
- The blind's eyesight returns in phases.
- Jesus sends the healed man home.

2.1.2 Identify the striking motifs in the main features.

Think about the overall theme of suffering in this part of the story.

- Remember the motifs in the study of Mark 1:40-45.
- If you see any of the motifs repeated here, try to ascertain how they fit in here.

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 2.1.3 Think about the people who brought the blind man to Jesus.

- Try to describe their motivation for bringing the man to Jesus in particular.
 - Take into account motifs such as Jesus' identity and authority.
 - Consider the hope of the people, as an expression of their faith that Jesus can help.
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2.1.4 Reflect on Jesus' action of taking him out of town.

- What would Jesus' reason be for doing this?
 - Consider the following motifs: social spaces; the exclusion of Jesus by the community; and the unusual places where God's Kingdom arrives (His new world becomes visible and his reign breaks through)
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- Think how these motifs can help you to formulate your thoughts about disability.
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2.1.5 Think about the process through which the man's eyesight was gradually restored.

- One interpretation of this portion is that it serves as a graphic presentation of how Jesus' disciples gradually began to understand who He is. In that sense it describes the growth of their faith.
 - Reread this portion of the story and decide whether you agree with the above interpretation.
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- Could this not be a method to explain the process of reflection on disability? Wouldn't it be wonderful if our own understanding and handling of disability in our community could grow progressively and our insight be intensified? Our Biblical insight on the subject could also develop.

2.1.6 Jesus sends the man home with the instruction not to visit his village.

- Don't you find this instruction strange? In Mark 1:40-45 Jesus sends the man whose leprosy is cured specifically to his village; why not here?

- Think about this while keeping Jesus' 'don't tell' instruction in mind - Jesus' identity had to remain a secret.
- Think about the motif of space where God is served and worshipped. The healing took place outside the village and the man must return to the privacy of his home. The village or town is avoided and the journey on the way that will end at Golgotha (outside Jerusalem) begins.

2.1.7 What does the story teach us about Jesus' relationship with people who are ostracized by others?

2.2 Mark 10:46-52 -- Jesus heals the blind Bartimaeus

2.2.1 Once more, identify the main features of this event.

- See the motive of movement and travel. Jesus is on His way to His death.
- Note how the man along the road, from outside the travelling group, asks for Jesus' attention.
- Listen how this outcast addresses Jesus as "Jesus, Son of David".
- Note how he pleads for healing and asks for mercy.
- Notice the reaction of the onlookers when the man started his appeal.
- Listen to what Jesus asked the man and how the meeting ended.

2.2.2 Identify once more the obvious motifs in this narrative.

- What can we learn about human need such as disability, from the actions of the characters?
 - Think about the motif of compassion and Jesus' close attention to the blind man.
 - Consider the travel motif in this story: Jesus and the group moving to Jerusalem and the man following Jesus after his healing. Doesn't it say something practical to or about people with disability in our time?
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2.2.3 Think about Jesus' question to Bartimaeus: "What do you want me to do for you?"

- Remember this question as a motif in the narrative.

2.2.4 Think about Jesus' statement that the man's faith had healed him.

- This is a rather problematic pronouncement in the debate re disability in our day. How must we see it?
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2.3 Combined study of Mark 8:22-26 and 10:46-52

When we study the second division of Mark's narrative about Jesus' suffering, we realise that He is now teaching and no longer doing miraculous healings. Quite notable is the last healing report about the blind Bartimaeus (10:46-52). The emphasis is not only on vision, but also on faith. In particular Bartimaeus' words: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" and Jesus' answer: "Go, your faith has healed you" (verse 52) deals with mercy and faith.

Also, the identification of Jesus as Son of David, is an identity marker that becomes important in the following chapters. "The Son of David" title accompanies the "Son of God" title that was earlier emphasized in Mark (1:1, 10-11; 9:2-8).

In Mark's Gospel the Bartimaeus episode comes at a stage when Jesus is already teaching his disciples about the suffering awaiting Him in Jerusalem - see Mark 8:31-32; 9:12-13, 30-32; 10:32-34. The reaction to the theme of suffering is unbelief, confusion, misunderstanding, resistance. And the reaction to what Jesus says is developing. In chapter 8 Peter reacts with resistance, but further on the disciples react with silence, fear, and apparent misunderstanding (chapter 10).

It is evident that suffering and the crucifixion of Christ is part of God's plan of redemption / salvation. Mark does not answer the question 'why?' He simply accepts it as inevitable. It is difficult for us, just as it confounded the disciples and the crowds that followed Him, but it is the heart of the gift of faith.

2.4 For further reflection and discussion

2.4.1 We tend to emphasize healing . .

- and cannot always understand why suffering is part and parcel of religious life.
- We cling to Jesus as the Great Physician, but tend to skim quickly and uncomfortably over those texts that clearly show that suffering is part of our lives.
- Both are true - healing and suffering form part of our faith experience.

2.4.2 The two texts describing Jesus' healings of the blind, are further examples of Mark's literary technique.

Together they form a framework for Mark 8:27 – 10:45, as comment on the behaviour of the disciples.

- The two stories emphasize the authority of Jesus over blindness.
- The healing also serves the function of teaching in Mark's narrative
- The healing of the blind serves as comment on the struggling faith of the disciples

2.4.3 Consider persons with disability as teachers of God's new world.

- How can persons with disability help us to realize the values of God's new world and make them part of our daily attitude towards life?

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- In the 'framed' section (Mark 8:27 – 10:45) the failures of the disciples are exposed in two ways:
 - Through Jesus' corrective training, and
 - Through the action of people in the section regarded by the powerful as inferior.

2.4.4 Somebody wrote that Mark laid down two requirements for the disciples before they would really understand Jesus' true identity and mission to the world: When their faith in Jesus meets His re-creative power.

- Think about it.
- Try to explain how this will help to clear up our thinking about disability.
- Do these stories help your understanding of what the Bible teaches us about disability?

3 Matthew 5 – 10: A foreign and surprising community

Background and arrangement of Matthew's Gospel

This Bible study is about the book Matthew. We want to determine whether the motives that we traced in Mark are also present in Matt. 5-10. Dirkie Smit will show us in this section of Matthew how the community belonging to Jesus came together through Jesus' ministry, and how Matthew presents this strange community.

Chapters 5-10 form a summary of Matthew's point of view that the disciples (Church) belong to Jesus.

Chapters 8 and 9 describe Jesus' works and form together with chapters 5-7 the full picture to which He had called His disciples and Church. It is important to know both His words and His works. The works of Jesus bring healing, redemption and compassion. They are amazingly good.

Matthew 8 and 9 are structured around nine miracles performed by Jesus. Matthew organised his narrative in three groups of three each, and after each group he comments on discipleship. His emphasis is all the time on full participation and the following of Jesus. Matthew wants to teach his readers something about the nature and calling of the Church, but also about the works of Jesus that should be emulated.

The first three miracles are about healing:

- A man with leprosy (8:1-4);
- The officer's slave (8:5-13);
- Peter's mother-in-law (8:14-17).

Matthew follows up the miraculous healings with teaching about the comprehensive following of Jesus.

Jesus asks for a definite break with all social, cultural and religious loyalties (even family ties), in order that people will be free to belong to Him alone (8:18-22).

The second group of three described miracles of a different kind:

- The disciples' fear of the physical force of a storm (8:23-27);
- Madness and enslavement (8:28-34);
- Paralysing and enslaving results of our own guilt and past (9:1-8).

These stories touch on the motifs of vulnerability and forgiving of sin. Man is vulnerable and exposed to the forces of nature, yet can be miraculously freed from sin and guilt. Then follows a pronouncement on discipleship, and the calling of Matthew, a tax collector. In the same way, Jesus calls all sinners and tax collectors (9:9-13).

The third group of three miracles was about powerlessness that originated from:

- Sickness and death (9:12-26);
- Blindness (9:27-31);
- Dumbness (9:32-34).

Again we see the matter of vulnerability and that Jesus set people free from evil powers, so that they can speak, see, live. Then an announcement about discipleship whereby followers of Jesus are called upon to have compassion for others. The spiritual eyes of those who follow Jesus should also awaken compassion in the followers for the needs of many who are world-weary and helpless (9:35-38).

Reflection and discussion

3.1 Matthew tells his readers about Jesus, so that we can understand who we ourselves are.

- He shows us a picture of God's new world
 - He challenges us to become what we are supposed to be.
 - Because we belong to Jesus, we must follow His example.
 - Would our experience of disability be different if we applied Jesus-like compassion?
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3.2 In Matthew "women" symbolise people of a lower order:

- Insignificant, disregarded, viewless, powerless, simple, outsiders, lost, second-rate, miserable, wretched, hopeless
 - The heartbeat of the Church's history is affected by their story, says Dirkie Smit. Do you agree?
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3.3 In Matthew these people appear under many names, with many faces.

3.3.1 "The women" is but one name for those who are marginalised. We also note:

- Children who are not reckoned with and are hindered - (18:1-6; 19:13 - 15).
- Sinners, prostitutes and tax collectors - all those whom people look down upon for moral or political reasons.

- The sick, the blind, the deaf, people with leprosy, people with paralysis - all those who are unable to care for themselves, who are dependent on the mercy of other people and the community.
 - The poor - those who hunger and thirst for righteousness;
 - The unemployed sitting on street corners, spending all their days waiting (20:1 . . .);
 - Those regarded by owners as useless and worthless, mere liabilities;
 - The sick and the mentally impaired (17:14 . . .);
 - Mothers in distress - calling for help because of children who are addicted (15:21 . . .);
 - Broken hearts and those who mourn, fathers whose children had died, women suffering from incurable diseases;
 - The powerless, addicts, the miserable - all those who are poor in spirit and know that they live only on mercy and favour.
 - Does this broad focus help you when you think about disability?
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3.4 In Matthew's Gospel Jesus includes all these struggling individuals as part of His people.

- His disciples, friends, brothers and sisters, church, congregation, witnesses, apostles.
- Jesus re-defines God's people.
- He calls, frees and creates a new church - a new community around and close to Him.

3.5 God's people are radically re-defined from chapter 18 to 24.

- Read Matthew 21:14-16.
 - The blind and people with paralysis, children and babies sing His praises.
 - They do what God's people really should have done.
 - Are we ready for God's deeper understanding of disabled identity?
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- Let us give the matter further thought and discussion.
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