

**Blindness Part 2**  
**Mark 8:22-26**  
**ABC 6/4/23**

The burning question on the minds of the people of Israel is, *Who is Jesus?* It's been well over a year since Jesus 1<sup>st</sup> appeared in Capernaum as an apparent successor to John the Baptist. Like John, Jesus came preaching that the kingdom of God was at hand. But the miracles Jesus performed indicated His ministry far exceeded that of John. The scribes and Pharisees see Jesus as a threat. They say He's a false teacher and have even accused Him of working by the power of Satan. The people of Israel are divided into 3 main camps. Some say that Jesus is John the Baptist, come back to life. This was Herod's fear. Others thought Jesus was Elijah, while still others thought He was one of the prophets. These people knew that Jesus was a miracle-worker but weren't quite sure how Jesus and His ministry fit into God's plan for Israel. There were also the crowds of poor, desperate, people who sought out Jesus because they were sick and suffering. These people hoped Jesus could help them. They followed Jesus wherever He went, even crowding around Him to the point that Jesus couldn't eat or rest. Ironically, the only group so far who truly recognize Jesus are the demons, who repeatedly identify Jesus as the Son of God. Then there are the disciples. Are they going to go the way of the Pharisees & harden their hearts & fall away? Or are they going to persevere in faith & progress to a better understanding of Jesus, who He is & why He came? Before we get to that, how many times did God have to try before He created exactly what He wanted? In other words, what steps did He take to create light? ***Let there be light; & there was light*** (Gen 1:3). God spoke & it happened, right? It was that way with all creation. What about Jesus in the NT? When He performed a miracle how many steps did He need? For example, how did the healing of the man with leprosy in Mk 1 happen? **Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand & touched him... Immediately the leprosy left him & he was cleansed** (41-42). Today we come to a healing that appears to have taken Jesus 2 tries to get right. Our text today, Mk 8:22-26, is linked to last week's passage as the boat journey that began in vs 13 comes to an end at Bethsaida in vs 22. This is also a passage of transition to the 2<sup>nd</sup> major section of Mark's gospel (8:22-10:52). While the 1<sup>st</sup> section (1:14-8:21) emphasized Jesus' ministry in & around Galilee & His role as the wonder-

working Messiah, the next section stresses the suffering role of the Servant Messiah. Being transitional, this passage has links both to what comes before & what follows. The healing of this blind man is similar in some ways to the healing of the deaf-mute man in 7:31–37. Both illustrate the spiritual deafness & blindness of the religious leaders (7:1–23; 8:11–13) & the danger the disciples also face (6:52; 8:14–21). In terms of what follows, the healing of this blind man forms brackets with the healing of blind Bartimaeus in 10:46–52. These 2 episodes frame the middle section of Mark’s gospel, during which Jesus seeks to open the blind eyes of the disciples by predicting His death 3x & teaching them about His suffering path to the cross. This passage, together with the 2 that follow (27–33; 34–9:1), forms a bridge as Jesus’ ministry turns decisively toward the cross.<sup>1</sup> It’s obvious that Mark’s emphasis on sight in the present miracle is contrasted with the emphasis on blindness & lack of comprehension in the previous 2 stories (11-13; 14–21). The flow of these stories is a clue that the lingering blindness of the disciples may also be cured, as is the blindness of the man at Bethsaida. Before we get into it, there are a number of things in common with this healing of the blind man & the healing of the deaf-mute man in chpt 7. They both illustrate the restoration of spiritual sight & hearing. These are also the only 2 miracles unique to Mark’s gospel. Their similarities include: 1) some unnamed people bring the man to Jesus & 2) they beg Jesus to heal him with His touch. 3) Jesus takes the man away privately, 4) touches the parts affected, 5) & uses spit in the healing. 6) After the miracle, He tells them to keep silent (implied in vs 26). The real lesson in our text today isn’t what Jesus does with this man but in what He’s trying to teach His disciples by illustrating it with this man. As you recall, in the boat journey heading toward Bethsaida the disciples suddenly realize they forgot their lunch & begin to argue. They’ve just witnessed the feeding of 4k people with more leftovers than they could count. They get in the boat & they’ve only got one loaf. They begin accusing each other & quarreling about it. They’re thoroughly & completely occupied with their stomachs. Jesus bangs their heads with a series of questions, including, **Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? Having eyes, do you not see? & having ears, do you not hear?** (17-18). They get to Bethsaida

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<sup>1</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, p 350

& Jesus performs this unusual miracle. This is the only miracle He performs in this fashion, by half-way healing a person & then fully healing him. While Mark doesn't tell us why this is He's doing it for a very deliberate reason. He's doing it in order to teach the disciples about something. He's saying to them, *This is where you are. This is what you are like. You've been partially healed, but you don't yet see clearly.* **22-26**

**1. Setting** (22) The boat with Jesus & the disciples lands at **Bethsaida** on the northeastern shore of the lake, east of where the Jordan flows into the Sea of Galilee. Luke places the feeding of the 5k near Bethsaida (9:10). The town was also the hometown of Peter, Andrew, Philip, & possibly Nathanael (Jn 1:44-45; 12:21). When Jesus comes ashore, **they**, some unidentified people, approach Him begging Him to touch & heal a blind man. This man had friends or family who believed Jesus could heal him. They brought him to Jesus & begged for healing which is common in Mark (1:40; 5:23; 6:56; 7:32). They want Jesus **to touch him**, to heal him. Jesus often heals with touch in Mark's gospel (1:31, 41; 5:23, 41; 6:5; 7:32; 8:23, 25; 9:27). When Peter's mother-in-law was sick with a fever, Jesus took her by the hand & raised her up (Mk 1:31). When a leper fell before Him, Jesus **stretched out His hand & touched him** in order to heal him (40). According to **Mk 3:10, He had healed many, with the result that all those who had afflictions pressed around Him in order to touch Him.** In Mk 5:23, Jairus pleaded for his dying daughter, asking Jesus to come lay His hands on her. Along the way, a woman with a hemorrhage was healed simply by touching the hem of Jesus' robe (27-29). Even in unbelieving Nazareth, Jesus **laid His hands on a few sick people & healed them** (6:5). Mark reports that **wherever He entered villages, or cities, or countryside, they were laying the sick in the market places, & imploring Him that they might just touch the fringe of His cloak; & as many as touched it were being cured (6:56).** Jesus' willingness to touch the sick & suffering demonstrates His infinite compassion. Unlike the religious leaders, who were aloof & avoided anything or anyone that might cause defilement, Jesus didn't keep His distance from hurting people. He reflected the compassion of God & demonstrated that tenderheartedness through personal touch. In Mark, where there are more references to laying on of His hands than

in any other gospel, all but one instance occur in the context of healings. The only as a blessing is the blessing of the children in 10:13.

**2. The Problem** was this man who is blind, unable to see at all. Blindness was widespread in the ancient world & Jesus healed a number of blind people throughout His ministry. But this is the 1<sup>st</sup> Mark records. Those who suffered from blindness were helpless & probably reduced to begging (Mk 10:46). Additionally, like others with disabilities or diseases, they were considered cursed by God (Jn 9:1–2).

**3. The Healing** As with the deaf-mute, this healing is also done away from the crowds. **23-24** Picture this: Jesus took the man's hand & gently guided him around obstacles, verbally directing him where to step, & steadies him when he stumbles. Mark doesn't say why Jesus takes the man outside the village, but the most likely reason is to avoid the publicity that the miracle would cause. Graciously & tenderly, Jesus escorts this blind man, those who brought him, & the disciples to a place where they could have some privacy. Much like Jesus had done with the deaf-mute man (7:33), He uses the puzzling practice of spit. He spits on the man's eyes. Obviously, saliva isn't some sort of magic potion. Jesus didn't need any props to accomplish His miracles, but it seems to symbolize His healing power for a blind man who could feel the spit on his eyes.<sup>2</sup> Jesus then asks a question, **Do you see anything?** which is unique in that it's the only time Jesus inquires about the success of a healing. This question seems like an echo of Jesus' questions of the disciples in the previous story, **Do you not yet see or understand?** (17). The blind man's response that he can see people who look **like trees walking around** tells us his eyesight isn't 100% restored. What's up with that? We'll get to it, but it seems to be a clue that the disciples themselves will be enabled by Jesus to begin the process of moving from blindness to sight. That Mark includes a story about healing a blind man immediately following a story about the disciples' blindness (14-21) suggests a relationship between the 2. Jesus purposely performs a partial healing here. He didn't suffer a lack of energy. It wasn't too difficult for Him. It wasn't that He tried & failed. This was premeditated & purposeful. He did it this way for a reason. The man **looked up** which can also mean *seeing again*

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<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, *Mark 1–8*, p 408

or *regain sight*.<sup>3</sup> For the 1<sup>st</sup> time ever, or at least in years, the man saw light & color & objects. Dimly, as though through water, he saw the form of those around him but they looked like walking trees. The Greek is awkward but the sense is perfectly clear: The man's vision is still blurred so he can only see vertical objects moving about. What he saw was badly out of focus. I imagine it would be like looking through Vaseline covered glasses. He could see people, but they were fuzzy & indistinguishable from trees. Since Jesus has led the man outside the town, the people he sees are probably those who brought him to Jesus &/or the disciples, who are nowhere else mentioned in this episode. **25**

Jesus touches his eyes again & he can see perfectly. The repeated touch can't imply insufficiency on Jesus' part since Jesus performs, from our perspective, more difficult miracles without fail, such as raising a dead girl (5:35–43). The completeness of the cure is emphasized with 3 statements: **he looked intently**, his sight was **restored**, & he **began to see everything clearly**. The piling up of terms for seeing is a remarkable feature of this whole passage. In vss 23–25, there are 2 words for **eyes**, 5 verbs of seeing, & 2 verbs related to restoration of sight. In the Greek there are 8 different words used for 9 instances of seeing in those vss.<sup>4</sup> The man now **looked intently** meaning to *see through* or *to see with a penetrating gaze*. The fog was gone. His vision was **restored**, in perfect focus, so that he was able to see everything with sharp clarity. None of the Lord's other healings ever resulted in partial, imperfect, or gradual restoration, nor was there ever a period of rehabilitation necessary. This miracle was no exception. In a matter of moments, the blind man went from debilitating blindness to perfect vision. He saw **everything clearly**, which is a rare word that means *to see clearly from afar*.<sup>5</sup> In other words, he had perfect vision.

**4. The Aftermath** After restoring the man's sight, Jesus... **26**.

The man must have lived either on the outskirts of town or in the countryside since Jesus tells him to go home but to avoid **the village** of Bethsaida. Jesus seems to be trying to avoid more publicity because His role isn't to defeat the Romans, but to journey to Jerusalem to suffer & die (31-32).

<sup>3</sup> E. S. Johnson, "Mark viii.22–26: The Blind Man from Bethsaida," *NTS* 25 (1978–79): 370–83, esp. 376–77; Collins, *Mark*, 394.

<sup>4</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, p 243

<sup>5</sup> Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, p 372

Bethsaida wasn't to know of this healing. Like the *blind* religious leaders, the residents of Bethsaida were also blind to the reality of Jesus. They'd witnessed many miracles, yet they refused to repent (Mt 11:21–22). Therefore, Jesus had already given a stinging rebuke against them. **Lk 10** says,

**Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had been performed in Tyre & Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth & ashes. But it will be more tolerable for Tyre & Sidon in the judgment than for you (13–14).**

By bringing the man outside of town & by telling him not to go back to town Jesus implies He doesn't want the man to tell what happened. The residents of Bethsaida have seen enough. Jesus confirmed the permanence of Bethsaida's unbelief & blindness. Like the Pharisees (Mk 8:11–13), the residents of Bethsaida were sentenced to ongoing spiritual blindness.

**5. The Meaning** This is an odd story. What's the point? Why does Mark include it? He gives us no explanation so how do we interpret it? Why did this miracle happen in a 2-step process? I don't know but I can make an educated guess based on Mark's apparent goals in his gospel and the themes that are in play in the context. The blind man's healing occurs between 2 examples of the disciples' blindness (8:14–21; 8:31–33). This physical healing of blindness serves as a model for the spiritual healing of the disciples' sight, which also comes gradually & with difficulty. I believe Jesus intentionally healed this man in stages as an object lesson for His disciples. In the boat, just before this incident, Jesus asked the disciples a series of rhetorical questions including, **Do you not yet see or understand?** (17, 21). It's as if, through this 2-stage healing, Jesus was saying the disciples had begun to see dimly. They weren't in total darkness. Their eyes had seen many of the marvelous things of Jesus. They had some understanding. But they hadn't yet seen clearly & fully. If they'd been asked to describe Jesus, they might have said, in effect, *I see a mighty oak walking around, but I don't really understand the full measure of who He is.*<sup>6</sup> As we'll see in what follows, this miracle seems to have been an eye-opening experience not just for the blind man, but for the disciples as well. After all the mighty works they'd seen Him do, after receiving His rebuke for their ongoing hardness of heart & spiritual blindness, & after seeing Him open the eyes of a man who was physically blind, something at last clicked. We must understand that Jesus' miracles were

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<sup>6</sup> RC Sproul, *Mark*, p 195

more than just healings. They were parables of spiritual truth. The 2-stage healing of this blind man reveals to us that God sometimes heals or saves in mysterious ways. **As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways & My thoughts than your thoughts (Is 55:9)**. Often God's ways are hidden, but He knows exactly what He's doing!<sup>7</sup> This story plays an important role in Mark's gospel because it continues to illustrate the arrival of the kingdom of God & gives evidence of the coming restoration of creation (Is 35:5-6; cf 29:18; 32:3; 42:7). It also illustrates the disciples' progress of faith. They've seen Jesus' authority from the beginning. They've responded to His call to follow Him (1:16-20), they've been appointed as His apostles (3:16-19), they've heard His proclamation of the kingdom, they've taught & healed in His name (6:7-13), & they've witnessed His healings, exorcisms, & miracles. In the context, both before & after this miracle, the disciples lacked understanding, spiritual sight. Their spiritual vision wasn't clear. They were followers of Jesus but they needed better spiritual sight. Which is a clue as to why this unique 2-stage healing. What is this miracle's purpose in Mark's gospel? Some have suggested it's to show the power of Jesus, that He can overcome even the most difficult cases. But it isn't clear why this blindness should be any more challenging than any of His other healings. A better explanation is that Mark includes the story to illustrate the gradual realization of the identity of Jesus. The partial sight of the man could refer to Peter's partial understanding of Jesus' messiahship in the next vss, which will only be fully comprehended by the disciples after His resurrection. In the events that follow, Jesus will repeatedly predict His death & the disciples will respond with a lack of spiritual insight. Only after His resurrection do they truly *see* Jesus for who He really is. From a spiritual perspective they *see* some things, as Peter's confession of Jesus' messiahship in the next passage illustrates. As Peter said, **"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."** & Jesus said to him, **"Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh & blood did not reveal *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven"** (Mt 16:17-18). But like the blind man after Jesus' 1<sup>st</sup> touch, they see only dimly. They don't understand Jesus' full identity or mission. They're still hard-hearted, prideful, weak in faith, & in danger of failing to see at all just like the Pharisees. In the passages that follow,

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<sup>7</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant & Savior*, p 197

Jesus reveals to them the suffering way of the cross. Through this healing Jesus is saying to His disciples, *You see, yes, you're not blind but you don't yet see clearly.* They'd been brought to sight, but their sight is partial. They don't yet fully grasp who Jesus is. They don't fully understand all the implications of the truths that come together as a consequence of Jesus' coming into the world. *I see men like trees walking,* this man said. & Jesus is saying to His disciples, *That's where you are. You don't see fully who I am & why I came.* The gradual healing of the blind man also illustrates the gradual progress of faith in the life of the disciples & in our own lives. Though they've begun their journey by choosing to follow Jesus, they have much to learn. There's a long & challenging road ahead & it will be full of fits & starts, 3 steps forward 2 steps back. It's no different for us today. The kingdom of God was inaugurated through the life, death, & resurrection of Jesus, but it has yet to be completed. Before that occurs, creation groans as in **the pains of childbirth, & we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body** (Rom 8:22–23). However, in our fallen flesh we still struggle & stumble. The key is to humbly get up, brush off, & keep moving forward in the power of the Spirit.<sup>8</sup> Paul says it well: **Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of *it* yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what *lies* behind & reaching forward to what *lies* ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus** (Phil 3:13–14).

As we near the midway point of this gospel, the 1<sup>st</sup> ½ has drawn attention to the disciples' inability to recognize that Jesus is the Messiah. They can't quite figure it out. When it finally dawns on Peter, the spokesman for the group, that Jesus is the Christ, the disciples encounter a new hurdle to their understanding. The 2<sup>nd</sup> ½ reveals their inability to understand that Jesus the Messiah must suffer and die and be resurrected from the dead. As Jesus asked the blind man, **Do you see anything?** so He'll ask the disciples, **Who do you say I am?** (29). Peter does see something. After all of Jesus' mighty works and deeds, he has a flash of insight: **You are the Christ** (29). The 1<sup>st</sup> stage of healing is complete. But he only has partial sight, as Jesus' rebuke in the next sentence makes clear (33).

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<sup>8</sup> Strauss, p 356



Peter sees, but he sees the equivalent of walking trees. Both Peter and the disciples require more insight before they'll realize that the Messiah must suffer and die.<sup>9</sup>

This was a miracle performed by Jesus for His disciples & it underscored a number of important truths for them. 1) It served as a confirmation of Jesus' deity, since only divine power could open the eyes of the blind (Ps 146:8). In the very next section of Mark Peter rightly confessed, **You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God** (Mt 16:16; Mk 8:29). 2) It provided the disciples with a glimpse of the future messianic kingdom, when Jesus will reign from Jerusalem for 1,000 years (Rev 20:1–6). During that time, death & disease will be greatly reduced, including things like blindness (Is 29:18; 35:5). 3) It marked a turning point in Jesus' ministry. His public ministry in Galilee was over & His focus was now on training His disciples. From this point forward, with the cross only months away, Jesus began to speak plainly to them about His coming death (Mk 8:31; 9:31; 10:32). Through this miracle it's as if Jesus is saying to His disciples,

*You see but not clearly & not everything. You don't understand My mission or your future. I'm going to the cross to die for your sins to provide your salvation. If you follow Me your life won't be easy. Peter, you'll die in Rome & be crucified upside down. Andrew, you'll go to Greece & be martyred there. Bartholomew, you'll go to Armenia & be killed. James, the son of Alphaeus, you'll go to Syria & they'll club you to death. Matthew, you'll go to Ethiopia & be stabbed to death. Philip, you'll die a cruel death in Carthage. Simon the Zealot, you'll go to Persia & because of your refusal to worship the sun god you'll be killed. & doubting Thomas, you'll go to India, & 4 soldiers with spears will kill you. You all think you see what it means to be My disciple, but all you see, Jesus is saying, are trees walking. Let me fill you in little on what it really means to be a disciple of Mine.*

This strange story is Jesus' way, I think, of teaching His disciples that they need to grow in their faith & knowledge if they're to face what's coming to them. This miracle served as an illustration for the disciples of the temporary spiritual blindness. Spiritually speaking, they'd once been like this blind man. Having been raised in traditional Judaism, they'd been taught to follow the guidance of the blind Pharisees & scribes (Mt 23:16). Even with the light of OT Scripture (Ps 119:105) & the advantages of being part of God's chosen nation (Rom 3:2; 9:4–5), their understanding of spiritual truth had been blurred & distorted by centuries of rabbinic tradition & religious hypocrisy. All of that would change for them. Jesus' saving touch removed the veil of darkness that once covered their unbelieving hearts (2 Cor 3:14–15). In an act of infinite compassion, Jesus miraculously gave

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<sup>9</sup> David E. Garland, *Mark*, p 313

them eyes of faith, as He does for every sinner whom He saves, so they could clearly grasp truth for the 1<sup>st</sup> time.<sup>10</sup> He is, as John describes Him, **the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man** (Jn 1:9). The disciples needed to grow in their faith. Paul would write to the Thessalonians & say how thankful he was because **your faith is greatly enlarged** (2 Thes 1:3). & Peter, in both of his letters, seems to be preoccupied with the issue of spiritual growth. In **1 Pt** he says, **like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow (2:2)**. In 2 Pt he gives the exhortation, **Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ** (2 Pt 3:18). It's interesting that Peter should be so preoccupied with the issue of growing. Maybe it's because he's remembering how hard for him in particular, & for all the other disciples, to grow. What's going to happen next in Mark's gospel? The incident at Caesarea Philippi where Jesus gives the clearest statement yet that He'll be betrayed, handed over to sinners, executed, & that He will die. Remember what Peter did? He took Him aside & began to rebuke Him. Imagine the arrogance of that! Peter takes Jesus aside & says to Jesus, *Lord, You must be mistaken*. Remember what Jesus says? **Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake & the gospel's will save it** (Mk 8:35) & I think Jesus here in Bethsaida is saying to His disciples, *You don't see that yet. You think you see what it means to be a disciple; you think you see all you need to see but you don't. You see as the partially healed blind-man saw, men as trees walking*. By the gradual healing of the blind man, Jesus shows how the disciples may come to a mature faith. Like the blind man, the disciples, who have eyes but do not see & ears but do not hear (8:18), can also be made to see & hear. But it hasn't happened fully yet. This man's healing shows the situation of the disciples, who move through the same stages in Mark, from nonunderstanding, being blind (8:17–21), to misunderstanding, having partial sight (8:29–33), to complete understanding & clearly seeing (as the centurion proclaimed, 15:39). Soon the disciples will no longer be blind, but their vision will remain imperfect & blurred for a time because they don't understand fully who Jesus is. Only after the cross & resurrection will they, like the man at Bethsaida, see **everything clearly**

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<sup>10</sup> MacArthur, p 409

(25).<sup>11</sup> How about you? Do you see Jesus for who He truly is? Not just a miracle worker but our substitute who dies in our place. Do we know **that the Son of Man had to suffer many things & be rejected by the elders & the chief priests & the scribes, & was killed, & after 3 days rose again (31)?** Do you believe that? If you're a partially seeing believer today, with only limited understanding, like all of us, a miracle can be done in all of our lives so we can see Him more clearly, love Him more dearly, and follow Him more obediently. If the Holy Spirit has been speaking to you as a person who's still blind, all you must do is confess your need of Jesus, ask Him for spiritual sight, & believe on Him, ask Him to save you & He will.

#### PRAY/Communion

Communion is for those whom God has opened their eyes to see Jesus for who He truly is & have placed their faith in Him. The disciples were on the other side of the cross & didn't fully understand why Jesus came. On this side of the cross, with the whole of Scripture, we know that He came to die in our place. Even at that 1<sup>st</sup> communion on the night before Jesus went to the cross, the disciples didn't see clearly what we can see as we look back. Jesus was the sinless sacrifice who willingly died as our substitute. He who was sinless suffered our fate as sinners & experienced God's wrath against our sins & died in our place. By eating of the bread & drinking of the cup we remember what He has done for us.

**While they were eating, Jesus took *some* bread, and after a blessing, He broke *it* and gave *it* to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body" (Mt 26:26).**

We eat of the bread remembering why Jesus came, to die in our place.

**And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave *it* to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins (Mt 26:27-28).**

We drink of the cup remembering that Jesus died for us & by faith we receive His righteousness so that we don't have to suffer the eternal consequences of our sin.

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<sup>11</sup> Edwards, p 245