

## When Sea Billows Roll

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Mark 4:35-41

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Our text this morning is the first in a series of four stories that bear witness to Jesus' divine identity and power. Over the next few weeks we will see:

Jesus has authority and power over nature (4:35-41)

Jesus has authority and power over demons (5:1-20)

Jesus has power and authority over sickness (5:25-34)

Jesus has authority and power over death (5:35-43)

*On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Mark 4:35-41*

### **THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM**

Our text this morning brings us to the end of another full day of ministry for Jesus. Mark says, "On that day, when evening had come..." This day began at the beginning of chapter 4 with Jesus teaching beside the sea. Teaching is what teachers do and Jesus, though He was infinitely more, was a teacher. Throughout the gospel narratives we see Jesus teaching in towns, in villages, in synagogues, in homes, by the sea, on mountainsides, in fields, in gardens, at weddings, beside sickbeds, sitting next to a well, over meals, to religious leaders and common folks, to small groups and to the masses, in the public area and in the intimate setting of an upper room. Everywhere we find Jesus we find Him teaching and preaching. What was He preaching? Mark tells us in Chapter 1 that Jesus was proclaiming the gospel of God, saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." He had come to point the world to Himself as the Messiah and Sovereign Redeemer of sinners.

Much of Jesus' ministry up to this point has taken place in and around the city of Capernaum, which sits right on the Northwest shore of the sea of Galilee. And this is where we find Jesus teaching at the beginning of chapter 4 - and on this day, like most, He has a full classroom! As has been a reoccurring theme in Jesus' early ministry, wherever He was, crowds of inquisitive followers were right at His side. As Jesus began to teach along the shoreline this afternoon, such a large crowd formed that Jesus and His disciples were forced to board a small fishing vessel where He continued to teach. It was from this small boat that Jesus taught the crowds the parable of the sower (path, rocky ground, thorns, good soil), the parable of the lamp and basket, the parable of the seed (grows at night), and the parable of the mustard seed. Verse 34 tells us that Jesus only spoke to the masses in parables, but to His disciples He explained everything. Jesus taught the crowds, but He interpreted his teaching to the disciples.

As the sun started to dip below the horizon, the throng of followers who assembled at the waters' edge probably began to dissipate. Already in the boat and weary, we can assume from a long day of teaching, Jesus instructs His disciples saying, "Let us go across to the other side." Mark narrates in verse 36, "And leaving the crowd, they took Him with them in the boat, just as He was. And other boats were with Him." While some would say that Jesus' purpose for setting sail to the other side of the sea was to retreat from the crowds and rest, which Jesus did do from time to time, I don't think this was Jesus' primary purpose for instructing the disciples to set sail for the other side of the sea. I think Jesus' purpose for crossing over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee was at least two-fold.

First, Jesus' ministry was always on the move. As we observe Him throughout the gospels, He rarely stays in a single location long. Remember back in chapter 1, after a long day of ministry Jesus got up early in the morning, went to a desolate place where He prayed. When His disciples found Him they chastised him (We will see them chastise Him again in just a few verses) for praying when he could have been leveraging His popularity with the crowds to advance His ministry. But Jesus replied to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out" Mark 1:38. Likewise, Jesus had just spent the day teaching the masses and now He tells His disciples, "Let us go across to the other side." We will find out what His ministry looks like when He and the disciples get to the other side when we move into chapter 5 next week.

I think the second reason that Jesus tells his disciples to pull up the anchor and head to the other side of the Sea was that it provided an opportunity for Him to test their faith. The disciples had been with Jesus for some time now. They, more than anyone else, had a front row seat to His life and ministry. They had heard Jesus teach and preach about the glories of the coming kingdom, they had seen Him cast out demons, they were present when He healed the sick and diseased, they had even seen Him forgive a man's sin in front of the religious leaders of the day. But for all they saw and heard, did they trust Him? Did they trust Him with their lives? Let's look at the text.

As they were crossing to the other side of the sea, verse 37 says, “A great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling.” The Sea of Galilee is a unique body of water. It’s actually not a sea at all; it’s a lake, the lowest freshwater lake on the planet – about 13 miles in length and 8 miles across in width. It’s nestled in a valley almost 700 feet below sea level and skirted by lofty mountain ranges that are gouged with deep ravines. These ravines function like a funnel, hurling strong cold winds from the mountains right down on top of the warmer air that hovers over the sea. When the colder mountain air collides with the warmer air over the sea, it results in incredibly abrupt and powerful storms. Mark uses the word *lailaps*, translated windstorm or gale winds in most of our Bibles, but can actually mean “hurricane” in the original language. Matthew calls the storm a *seismos*, literally an earthquake. You can imagine the intensity of this storm if the disciples, at least four of whom were experienced fisherman (Peter, Andrew, James and John), were terrified.

Matthew’s account of this story (8:24) notes that the storm came suddenly, without warning. Without warning, the disciples world was shaken. In a split second, all that was calm became chaos. The gentle breeze that filled the small vessel’s sail was now gusting with hurricane force and the gentle waves that lapped against the side of the boat were now crashing into its hull and cascading over its bow and stern faster than the disciples could bail it out. Aren’t most of our storms sudden? Having the doctor sit you down and tell you that it’s cancer and you have 4-6 months to live – that’s a sudden storm. When your spouse has been unfaithful – that’s a sudden storm. There’s been a wreck – that’s a sudden storm. I’m sorry but we’re eliminating your position; the untimely death of a loved one, these are all sudden storms...

And how did they respond? Look at the end of verses 38...Panic-stricken, riddled with fear the disciples wake Jesus and chastise Him saying, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” From the disciples’ perspective Jesus was unaware of their plight. They thought that Jesus was oblivious to their misery – that He had forsaken them. Don’t we often feel that way too, in the middle of life’s storms? We mistakenly conclude that we are all alone, that no one, not even God knows what is happening or how we are feeling. Christian, nothing could be farther from the truth. God knows every wave that falls on you and He is using each one for a specific purpose. When life *seems* most out of control, it could never be more in control!

Every storm in your life and in mine is a divinely ordained moment whereby God is working to reveal *who He is*, *who we are*, and *who we need*. You see, trials and tribulations, difficulties and desperate moments are often the times when God does His greatest work in our hearts and lives. He sovereignly orchestrates circumstances, for our good, that bring us to the end of ourselves and drive us to Himself. He is refining us, growing us, sanctifying us, chiseling away that which doesn’t reflect the glory of His Son. He is at work preparing you for the day when you will stand before Him without spot or wrinkle or any such defect. God is preparing you for eternity with the storms of today! The disciples, and we alike, need to learn that Jesus can be trusted in the storms of life. That

tiny boat carrying Jesus and His disciples was the object of the most minute Heavenly attention - and so it is in our trials. We “trust” Him when the skies are clear and the sea is calm, but we doubt Him when the wind howls and the waves come crashing in – when the clouds of trials, difficulties, and hardships, fill our view. There are two things that we often doubt in the middle of our trials:

1. We doubt His *goodness* – Do you not care...
2. We doubt His *grace* – That we are perishing...

The story was once told of an officer in the Army who was drafted abroad with his regiment. He, a pious man, accordingly embarked with his wife and children. They had not been many days at sea when a violent storm arose, which threatened the destruction of the ship, and the loss of all their lives. Consternation and terror prevailed among the crew and passengers; his wife was also greatly alarmed. But in the midst of the whipping wind and crashing waves the officer was perfectly calm and composed. His wife, observing his untroubled disposition, began to chastise him, urging, that if he was not concerned for his own safety, he ought to be concerned for theirs. Without a reply he left the cabin only to return in a short while with his sword drawn. With a stern countenance he pointed it at his wife’s chest. But she, with a faint smirk on her face, did not give the faintest hint of fear or concern. “What!” he said, “Are you not afraid when a sword is drawn at your chest?” “No,” she said confidently, “Not when I know that it’s in the hand of one who loves me.” To which he replied, “Then why would you have me to be afraid of this storm when I know that it’s in the hand of my Heavenly Father who loves you and me?”<sup>1</sup>

## **THERE IS GREAT PURPOSE IN EVERY ONE OF YOUR TRIALS**

Rest assured that each trial God providentially allows to come to pass in your life comes with great purpose. James tells us not only how we should respond to God-ordained trials in our lives, but he also tells us what their purpose is. James writes in James 1:24, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” We cannot forget that God works all things together for the good of those who love Him. Just like a master tailor carefully stitches together a beautiful garment, so God has wisely and sovereignly tailored a set of divine circumstances for your life that will result in you bearing more and more of a resemblance to His Son, Jesus Christ (Romans 8:28–29). Martyn Lloyd Jones once said:

*The Christian does not know everything, but he does know one thing. Look at him in trouble with everything apparently [at odds] against him, [when] he is so perplexed that he does not know what to pray for as he ought. He is confused and does not [always] understand. Yet even at that very point he can say, “I do not know which way to turn or to go; I do not understand why these things are happening, and I do not know exactly what to ask for at this moment. But I know this,*

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<sup>1</sup> Collection by J.L. Nye, *Anecdotal Illustrations of the Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Bemrose & Sons), 25.

*that in spite of my ignorance, and in spite of everything that is happening to me, this and everything else is working together for my good.<sup>2</sup>*

Peter encourages us, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you (the disciples were surprised), as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” 1 Peter 4:12-13. Likewise, James writes, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” James 1:2-3. One pastor said this about how Christians are to view their trials:

*We're not to view trials as some sort of cosmic accident from a God who's just toying with us, detached from any purpose in a way that leaves us in continual hopelessness and despair, nor are trials [an act] of God puppeteering evil over us...That's not the lens by which a Christian is meant to view trials. Those aren't God's purposes. Instead James paints a picture for the Christian here to view trials with joy as an act of faith for what God's divine plan is working out in our lives to produce in us what we could not produce on our own.<sup>3</sup>*

## **WHAT DO TRIALS PRODUCE IN THE LIFE OF A CHRISTIAN**

1. God uses trials to help us learn to trust His wise providence and goodness in our lives. God knows what is best for me and God does what is best with me.

2. God uses trials to expose our hearts and to deepen our faith.

Jeremiah 17:9 tells us that our hearts are deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? Oftentimes God uses trials in our lives to help us see the sin (unbelief) that resides in the depths of our hearts. The 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan, Thomas Watson wisely said:

*Affliction teaches what sin is. In the word preached, we hear what a dreadful thing sin is, that it is both defiling and damning, but we fear it no more than a painted lion; therefore God lets loose affliction, and then we feel sin bitter in the fruit of it. We see that corruption in our hearts in the time of affliction, which we would not believe was there. Water in the glass looks clear, but set it on the fire, and the scum boils up. In prosperity, a man seems to be humble and thankful, the water looks clear; but set this man a little on the fire of affliction, and the scum boils up — much impatience and unbelief appear. “Oh,” says a Christian, “I never thought I had such a bad heart, as now I see I have; I never thought my corruptions had been so strong, and my graces so weak.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> D. M. Lloyd Jones, *Romans : An Exposition of Chapter 8:17-39*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 177.

<sup>3</sup> Quote from a sermon written by Shea Sumlin “God’s Purposes in Your Trials” April 28, 2013

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Watson, *All Things for Good*. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), 27-28.

3. God uses trials to teach us to pray.

We are called to pray continually - without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). But oh how often do we become soft in our prayer life. Prayer communicates a lot of things, but it especially communicates how dependent we believe we are upon God. Prayer communicates that God is the all-sufficient benefactor and that we are the ever-needy beneficiaries of His grace.

4. God uses trials to reveal our smallness, weakness and frailty.

God ordained trials serve as a reminder that we are not in control. They remind us that we are not as strong as we thought we were. They serve to keep us from thinking more highly of ourselves that we ought (Romans 12:3). They remind us that He is the potter and we are the clay.

5. God uses trials to humble us and shake us of our self-confidence.

We all need to be humbled. We need to be shaken of our self-confidence. It is good for us to be brought low before God. It reminds us of our need for forgiveness and grace. It reminds us of how dependent we are on God. When we are humble and contrite, we are in the best position to learn from God and to be submissive to His will for our lives.

6. God uses trials to loosen our attachment to the things of this world.

*When you dig away the earth from the root of the tree, it is to loosen the tree from the earth; so God digs away our earthly comforts to loosen our hearts from the [things of] earth. God would have the world hang as a loose tooth which, being twitched away, does not much trouble us. Is it not good to be weaned? The oldest saints need it.*<sup>5</sup>

7. God uses trials to arrest our attention and awaken us from spiritual slumber.

We get apathetic and spiritually lethargic at times... Martyn Lloyd Jones said, "The most dangerous time for a Christian is when everything seems to be going well without much change and without much incident." If we are not careful we can easily slide into the ruts of life and become complacent. Trials have a way of startling and awakening us. Jones concludes, "It is good to have the routine of life upset occasionally, no matter what the interruption may be."

8. God uses trials to draw us back when we wander away from Him.

Remember Isaiah 53:6, "We all like sheep have gone astray." Even redeemed sheep are prone to wander, prone to leave the God we love. And because God is a good shepherd, he graciously extends His shepherds' hook and draws us back in. Twice in Psalm 119 the Psalmist acknowledges that God has used affliction to draw him back to Himself and grow him spiritually. In verse 67 the Psalmist writes, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word." Likewise in verse 71 he says, "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes."

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Watson, 29.

Let me ask you a question - when was the last time that you thanked God for your trials? In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, which is a great passage to memorize, Paul says, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Let me ask you another question - What if the answer to your trials is, "My grace is sufficient for you" 2 Corinthians 12:9? How will you respond? What if, in God's wisdom, He has determined not to turn down the trial, but instead to turn up His grace? Sometimes God calms the storm, but sometimes God lets the storm rage on and calms His child. If we understand that God is in control and that He is working all things for our good, then we can say with Job, "Though He slay me, I will hope in him." In the rain and in the pain, He's our tower and our power.

The disciples, though they lacked faith in the moment, are not abandoned to a watery peril. Look at verse 39. Mark writes, "And He awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. Jesus spoke to the winds, and they obeyed him. He spoke to the waves and they submitted to His command – turning placid as a pond. The elements knew the voice of their Master, and, like obedient servants were quiet at once. Though the disciples allowed their fear to trump their faith, Jesus didn't ream them. He rebuked the wind and the waves first. What a good Shepherd we have!

The language that Jesus employs here in verse 39 is most interesting. The word "rebuked" is the same word that is used in (1:25) when Jesus rebuked the evil spirit in the synagogue in Capernaum. Likewise, the Greek word translated "Be still" literally means "Be muzzled". This is a bit technical, but that verb occurs in the second person singular, as though Jesus were addressing a person and not just the natural elements of wind and waves. Jesus' language here is more appropriate of demonic forces than of inanimate nature. While verse 39 undoubtedly reveals Jesus' authority over the natural order, more than that it reveals Jesus as the Strong Man who vanquishes Satan. Satan would love to sink the ship carrying God's people and the captain of their salvation – but just as the natural elements submit to Jesus' authority, so do Satan and the demons. As we turn the to chapter 5 next week, we will see Jesus confronted again with demonic forces that would try and thwart the extension of His ministry into Gentile regions.<sup>6</sup>

After Jesus rebuked the wind and the waves, the beam of His heart-searching spotlight came to rest on His disciples. Look at verse 40. Jesus asks them this penetrating question. He said to them, "Why are you so afraid?" Why did you panic? Why were you fearful? Why did you doubt my care and concern for you? Why did you think I had forsaken you? And then He puts His finger right on the reason. Look back at the text. He says, "Have you still not faith?" Was it that the disciples had no faith at all? I don't think that's what Jesus is implying here. The disciples had faith, but in the moment of their trial, they exchanged their faith for their feelings. All they could see was their immediate circumstances.

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<sup>6</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Mark*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 150.

They had forgotten all that Jesus had said to them in the Sermon on the Mount about the extent of God's care for them. They had forgotten that God takes care of the birds who neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns. They had forgotten that God clothes the lilies of the field (Matthew 6:26-30). They had forgotten that God has the hairs on their head numbered (Matthew 10:30). They let their feelings do the talking instead of their theology. You see, faith is the response to truth. When the storm clouds of trials and tribulations come rolling into your life, and they will, you must remind yourself of what you know to be true from God's Word. You must remind yourself of what you know to be of surety concerning God's character.

The greatest danger in this story isn't the wind and the waves...The greatest danger in this story is our unbelief. Our greatest problems don't exist around us, but rather within us. Fear is the opposite of faith. Fear is the product of unbelief. The writer of Hebrews warns us when he says, "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God" Hebrews 3:12. Will your fear of the Lord lead you to put your trust in Him? Fear that does not take you to God, will take you away from God.

Look at verse 41. Mark writes, "And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'" The disciple's original fear of the storm was replaced by a new fear, a fear of the One whose words had brought it to naught. The disciples' fear was a response to a new depth of understanding about the person of Christ. This was a paradigm-shifting day for these men. They had witnessed Jesus heal disease and cast out demons (power over evil), but this evening they were brought face to face with the with the One whose omnipotent voice stilled the raging sea. They realized that God was in their boat.. The presence of God is more terrifying than the most destructive of natural forces. Why? Because if you see God, then God sees you. You see His glory, and He sees your sin. We see this in Isaiah 6 right?

*I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"*

## **JESUS HAS ENDURED THE WORST STORM FOR US**

Every storm this side of eternity is temporal. Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18, "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." But there is a storm coming, the storm of God's wrath that will rage forever. We need be reminded that the only reason we have hope in the midst

of life's storms is because Jesus Christ endured the storm of God's wrath on the cross. Jesus endured the storm so that we might be at peace with a thrice-holy God and be saved. On the cross, Jesus calmed the only storm that could truly sink us – the storm of God's wrath and judgment. If Jesus settled that storm, He, the God-man, can be trusted to handle every other temporal storm we may encounter. To voyage with Jesus is to voyage in peace even in a storm. In the presence of Jesus we can have peace even in the wildest storms of life.

*God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform  
He plants His footsteps in the sea  
And rides upon the storm  
Deep in His dark and hidden mines  
With never-failing skill  
He fashions all His bright designs  
And works His sovereign will*

*O fearful saints new courage take  
The clouds that you now dread  
Are big with mercy and will break  
In blessings on your head  
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense  
But trust Him for His grace  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face*