

May 4, 2025

### WHO THEN IS THIS?

Mark 4:35-41

*(8 of 22 in a series through Mark 1-9)*

The story that we will look at this morning in Mark 4:35-41 can feel, in some ways, utterly irrelevant to us. It's a story where the disciples are in a boat with Jesus, on their way to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, when a strong storm comes through, threatens the boat and the lives of all on board, and Jesus speaks to the storm so that he calms the wind and waves. You can see why I would say that this story can feel irrelevant to us as we seek to live our lives in faithfulness to the Lord in the year 2025 in Jackson, Tennessee. I mean, if I had a guess, none of us will find ourselves in a boat on the Sea of Galilee with the God-man, Jesus Christ, on board with us, facing a storm.

On the other hand, there are so many elements in this story that, as I read over it this week, led me to say, "Man, I've made that same mistake, thought that very thing, and doubted in that same vein." And my guess is that you have too. Because though none of us has probably ever been in a boat on the Sea of Galilee when a storm rose up, we've all found ourselves in situations we didn't anticipate that we're frightening, discouraging, or troubling to us in some way, and our response to the Lord has all too often been just like the disciples in this scene we find in our text this morning. Therefore, I want to walk through the story that we find in these verses and see what it is that we need to learn from Jesus' greatness and power and from the disciples doubts and failures because I think we'll find this text extremely helpful for aiding us in living faithful, holy lives. The first thing that I want to note from this story is that the Lord will intentionally lead us into difficult situations.

#### **The Lord will intentionally lead us into difficult situations**

So, here's what happens in the story. After Jesus spoke to the people, teaching them the parables that we saw last week, Jesus said to the disciples, "Let us go across to the other side" (v. 35). And Mark tells us that "they took him with them in the boat, just as he was" (v. 36). Now, this note that Jesus went "just as he was," I don't think is some note about him not changing clothes or fixing his hair before he went. Rather, I think Mark is telling us that Jesus didn't go back to the shore before going across the sea. Remember from Mark 4:1 how we were told that the crowd beside the sea was so large that "he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea" so that he wouldn't be crushed by the crowd that wanted to get close to him, touch him, and potentially crush him? Well, Mark seems to be telling us that Jesus set off with the disciples from that very position, without going to the shore first. Just as he was, sitting in the boat, he headed with the disciples across the sea. But the trip didn't go as the disciples anticipated.

We're told that as they're crossing, "a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling" (v. 37). Meanwhile, Jesus was in the stern of the sheep, asleep on the cushion (v. 38), which is a reminder that this story comes from an eye-

witness account (probably Peter), who remembers this detail of Jesus sleeping on that cushion, after a long day of teaching. But, aside from that, this is a terrifying moment for the disciples. What seemed like an easy, predictable trip has turned into a situation that they fear will take their lives.

But I want to stop us here in the story just to note this—the Lord will intentionally lead us into difficult situations. That’s precisely what we see in this story. Remember that it wasn’t the disciples’ idea to cross the sea. Rather, Mark tells us in verse 35, that it was Jesus who’d said, “Let us go across to the other side.” Jesus was the one who gave the directive to put these disciples in this difficult situation where they thought they were going to die.

And what we need to understand as followers of Jesus Christ is that we’re no exception to this. Our Lord will intentionally lead us into difficult situations. It’s what he’s always done. A survey of Israel’s history will reveal constantly that he’s leading them into situations in which to test them or work something that they couldn’t foresee. Think about when Israel requests of Sihon, king of the Amorites, in Numbers 21 to let the pass through his land. This is a particular moment where an Israelite might be tempted to think, “If God is really in this and leading us, he’ll say, ‘Yes.’” Well, he says, “No.” And so they have to go into battle against him and, consequently, against Og and his army as well.

Now, sure, they defeat both, but, again, you could imagine an Israelite thinking, “Why is this so hard, if we’re doing what God wants us to do?” But God was leading them. He was just leading them intentionally into a difficult and trying situation. And pushing ahead in the Old Testament storyline a bit, one reason is so that he might lead them into the promised land. If you’ll remember, when the two spies went to Rahab in Joshua 2, she said the men in the town lost all hope when they heard that the Israelites had defeated Og and Sihon. The Lord had led them into a difficult situation because he was working something together that they couldn’t foresee or imagine.

And the same pattern continues into the New Testament as well. When you come to the New Testament and examine the earliest followers of Jesus, they’re constantly put in difficult situations precisely because they’re attempting to follow and obey Jesus. When the Lord Jesus Christ called Paul to himself to become the apostle to the Gentiles, he told Ananias, “I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:16). Even the Lord Jesus Christ was not excepted from this. We heard the temptation account read earlier where Jesus had been fasting for forty days only to face a barrage of attacks from the devil immediately after. Well, who put him in that situation? Matthew starts the temptation account writing, “Then Jesus was led up *by the Spirit* into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Matt 4:1). And this reality became so common and accepted by Jesus’ disciples, that Peter wrote in 1 Peter 4:12, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”

The disciples’ situation here, then, where they obey Jesus only to face great difficulty is not some odd, one-off incident. Obeying the Lord will often put us in difficult situations because the Lord

will intentionally lead us into difficult situations because he has purposes and plans we simply can't see or imagine. To develop a theology that says that following Jesus should lead to a peaceful, easy, pleasant, carefree path in life is to develop a theology divorced from the plain teaching of Scripture. I doubt many of us would challenge that. However, it's worth asking ourselves how many of us think that at the first sign of struggle or hardship in our lives that something is wrong? Or, how many of us think, "This must be the Lord's will because everything has been so easy?" Both these paths are off base. Rather, we should say that the Lord will occasionally—but quite intentionally—lead us into difficult situations because he knows what is best for us and is treating us as his sons. Again, see Matthew 4:1-11 and how the Father treated his own Son whom he obviously loves dearly and had just stated at his baptism. And this leads us to our next point. When the Lord leads us into difficult situations, these are not times to doubt his love for us.

### **These are not times to doubt his love for us**

As the disciples find themselves in the midst of an unexpected storm, with the winds howling and waves crashing onto the boat so that it was taking on water, what is their first response to Jesus? Mark tells us that they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" (v. 38). Their first reaction is to question Jesus' care. That is, they question his love for them. And as odd as we might think that is as we read this story, isn't that often our first reaction as well when we find ourselves in times of difficulty?

How many of us could tell stories where moments in our lives didn't turn out the way that we anticipated, and these times sent us into a tailspin of doubting God's love for us? My guess is that all of us could. Perhaps from your point of view, the Lord didn't do what you thought he should do in your marriage, with your struggle with infertility, with your child's health struggle, and on and on, and your response was to say, "God, why don't you love me?" Again, that's precisely what the disciples did. Their pleasant trip across the sea turned into a nightmare that looked like it was going to kill them, and their response was, "Why don't you care, Jesus?"

Now, because we often respond in our situations the same way the disciples do here, it's helpful for us to sit on the sidelines for a second and critique their response. If we could speak to the disciples at that precise moment, knowing what we know, wouldn't we point out how absurd their accusation that Jesus didn't love and care about them was? I mean, why was Jesus with them in the first place? Why did he come? In the most memorized text of the Bible—John 3:16—we're reminded that God sent his Son into the world because of his love for us. In Romans 5:8 tells us that God shows his love for us in that Christ came to die for us while we were his enemies. So, Jesus was with his disciples in the first place because he'd come in order to bring about their salvation in his love for them by bearing the wrath of God they deserved so that they might be saved, and here they are asking whether or not he cares that their lives are being threatened! Do you see the absurdity? Wouldn't we point that out to them?

Okay, now let's issue that same critique against ourselves. After all, aren't we precisely in that same place when we question God's love? I mean, Jesus loved us and gave himself for us, and

yet we question God's love when we face trying times. We need to realize that there is simply no room for a believer to be able to articulate the good news that Jesus died for us and simultaneously question God's love for us. It makes no sense. Those two things are utterly incompatible.

But it's not just that we have the gospel. The Scripture also explicitly tells us that because God loves us as his children, he will take us through times of formative discipline that will shape us and mold us more into the image of Christ. In other words, the Bible teaches us that the Lord intentionally leads us into difficult times in our lives *precisely because he loves us* and is forming and shaping us.

Paul told the Corinthians that he'd even gone through a time that was so challenging, he despaired of life itself, and yet it was all so that he might rely on God more (2 Cor 1:8-9). It can even be that a life of ease is evidence one doesn't belong to Christ, as the Lord disciplines those whom he loves. So, when you find yourself walking through a time of difficulty, it is not a time to doubt God's love for you. Additionally, these are not times to doubt the truthfulness of God's Word.

### **These are not times to doubt the truthfulness of God's Word**

One other element of doubt is exposed in the interaction of Jesus' disciples with their Lord during this moment of fear, and it's that they doubt the truthfulness of his Word. Here's what I mean. Jesus states clearly what will happen in this story. He says, "Let us go across to the other side" (v. 35). This would suggest that they're making it to the other side. And Jesus, it seems, suggests that they should have understood this and believed it to be the case. Here's why I say that.

After the wind and waves pick up and the boat is taking on water, while Jesus is sleeping in the stern of the ship, the disciples wake him, ask if he cares that they're perishing, and then we're told that he "awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' and the wind ceased and there was great calm" (v. 39). But after doing that, Jesus says something to them that sheds light on how he sees their response. He says, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" (v. 40).

Faith in what? Well, faith that Jesus is why he's revealed himself to be and would accomplish what he wants to accomplish—including getting to the other side of the sea. The disciples have seen Jesus cast out demons, heal a leper, and handle any attack that has come his way masterfully, and yet now, as he tells them to go to the other side while he sleeps in the boat, they assume that they're all going to die. They should have paused, taken a moment's reflection on who Jesus is, what he'd said, and decided that they would trust him. Instead, they were afraid and faithless. They clearly had spent a lot more time calculating all the things that could happen because of their dangerous circumstances than they had spent reflecting on the Word and nature of their Lord.

Something doesn't go as we anticipate in our lives or a steep hill appears in front of us, and all of the sudden we're filled with fears, anxiety, and doubt? Has Jesus changed in that moment? Did his promises suddenly disappear just prior to our recent struggle? Of course not. The question is, "Will we trust in our Lord and rest in his promises?"

Again, let's expose the foolishness of our doubt by, once again, sitting on the sideline and critiquing the disciples in the boat that day. What would we have said to them in their moment of panic? We would probably say, "Look, guys, the Son of God is on the boat, and he said for you to go to the other side. You know he can cast out demons, make the lame walk, the deaf hear, the blind see, and more. Perhaps you shouldn't panic. Perhaps you should trust him and rest."

I mean, you'd almost be embarrassed for them being so afraid and having such little faith. Ok, now ask what you should say to yourself, as you're gripped with doubts, fears, and anxiety while the Lord Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever, loves you, is in control of the world, and has promised to work all for our good? Let's make sure we're preaching to ourselves in the same way we would preach to them. After all, times of difficulty aren't times when we would doubt God's Word. And, finally, since I've told you two things these times aren't for, let me finish with one thing times of difficulty are for. These are times to consider and remind ourselves who our Lord is.

### **These are times to consider and remind ourselves who our Lord is**

As the episode ends, after Jesus had calmed the wind and waves and rebuked the disciples for their fear and lack of faith, we're told, "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?'" (v. 41). The fear at seeing what Jesus had done was fear in light of the majesty of Jesus as the God-man. He'd just done something that was beyond their comprehension for any man to do, and they were filled with fear. We're actually going to see this throughout Mark's gospel, and it's even how the gospel ends, with the women going to the tomb, seeing an empty tomb, hearing an angel tell them that Jesus is risen, and going away afraid (Mark 16:8).

Fear and awe are the natural responses to one whose greatness is beyond what we've seen and can comprehend. I mean, if we were in a storm and someone said, "Be still," and the storm stopped, my guess is that we wouldn't casually say to that person, "That was impressive. What did you think of the game the other night?" We'd be overwhelmed and probably even fearful at what manner of person we're in the company of. That's precisely what the disciples are doing here. They're afraid and asking who in the world Jesus is that even the wind and sea obey him.

Now, what's key for us to understand in this moment as well is that the Old Testament bears witness to the fact that God and God alone does this. In the Psalm we opened the service with as our call to worship, we read that God "rebuked" the waters and "they fled" (Psalm 104:7). Psalm 106:9 reminds us that God "rebuked the Red Sea, and it became dry." And Psalm 107:23-29 tells a story, saying, "Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters; they saw the deeds of the LORD, his wondrous works in the deep. For he commanded and raised

the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. . . . He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.” This stirring up of the wind and waves and calming of these things were seen as the deeds of the Lord and deeds that God alone could do. Yet here is Jesus doing (once more) what only God does in the Old Testament? It’s a time for them to stop and consider who Jesus is.

The same thing is true in our seasons of difficulty. They’re times for us to ask, “Who then is Jesus?” And if you’re a believer, the answer to this question should fill you with faith, trust, peace, and hope. He is the one who loved you, gave himself for you, and upholds the universe by his divine power, having written in his book all of your days before any of them had been lived. That means that he not only wrote this day down but tomorrow as well. Asking who Jesus is not only should lead to greater faith but greater rest. You see, all too often, we make the same mistake the disciples did here, and we get locked in on the difficulty of the circumstances more than the identity and nature of the one sleeping in the stern of the boat and the one who reigns over all at the Father’s right hand. So trust him and obey him. That is our calling.

Again, following the Lord doesn’t mean that life will always come up roses and lilies. Obeying Jesus doesn’t mean that your paths should always be clear and simple to traverse. In fact, the Lord will oftentimes intentionally lead us into times of difficulty that he knows can shape and form us for good. He disciplines those whom he loves. Therefore, do not look at your difficult circumstances and begin to question his love for you. Don’t look at your challenges and begin to question the truthfulness of his Word. Rather, remember his love demands these moments in your life so that you might grow to rely on him more. Trust in all of his promises and all his Word declares. And use this as an opportunity to remind yourself of who your Lord is—the one who has redeemed you and who controls every miniscule element in creation. So, let’s rest, trust, obey, and worship our Lord who lived, died, and was raised for us. May we proclaim our trust in him now as we come to the table. Amen.