

RUF Large Group Bible Study

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Miracle of Calming the Storm (Mark 4:35-41, Matthew 8:23-27)²

Mark 4:35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." 36 And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. 37 And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. 38 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?" 39 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. 40 He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" 41 And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?"

Matthew 8:23 And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. 24 And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. 25 And they went and woke him, saying, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing." 26 And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?" Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. 27 And the men marveled, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?"

(see also Luke 8:22-25)

What does it mean to follow Jesus? In the passage that precedes ours tonight, in the Matthew account, Jesus talks about how following him is an all-or-nothing deal. There is a great cost, and you can't do it half-way. He finishes that section with "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead." Your excuses for not following Jesus won't cut it with him. If you are spiritually dead, then you will find all kinds of excuses to follow him.

So the disciples follow him. They follow him intellectually and spiritually and even physically. They get into a boat, a fishing boat without sails, and set off over Lake Galilee to get to the other side. What could be nicer, right?

I'm thinking of some of the great times I've had at the lake with my friends. A cooler of cold drinks, the hot sun, some turkey sandwiches, my kids tubing for hours, some spicy beef jerky. I'm ready to go right now.

Isn't that the Christian life? If you listen to some people preach and teach, you'd sure think so. This health and wealth gospel teaches that if things aren't going well for you, then you have some sin in your life that has gone unrepented, you have no faith.³ We can sure agree with that sometimes, for sin does truly destroy our lives and can remain undetected for a long time, but is that why all bad things happen? Is that why we go through struggles? Is that why Ruth, my daughter was born three months premature? Is that why Julie was smashed into last October? Is that why John Harris was hit by a car while he was out for a walk last Tuesday night?

This passage addresses some of those questions. Jesus is there in the struggle. Let's see what this miracle teaches us about him. I have four points this week: your storms, O you of little faith, Jesus in the boat, and you will make it to the other side.

Your storms

Starting here makes us start with application, which is a little strange and out of place. We're going to apply this passage to the storms we have in our lives. Now, we have to be careful we don't *only* take this tactic; this way of looking at this passage is often used by liberals and liberal scholars to get away from an actual nature miracle.

I believe that the Bible clearly shows that this actually happened. So we're looking at a true miracle of calming the storm here. Jesus woke up, spoke and instantly the winds and the waves obeyed him. That is tremendous. What does it mean for us?

There are situations in your life where it feels like you're dying. The disciples were on the lake, having a nice time talking and eating some brats when this storm blew in. They were probably calm at first, then got a little worried, and then they act like it was one of those scenes from "The Perfect Storm" or "Master and Commander" when their whole world was being rocked. There often were storms on the lake, but Matthew calls this a *seismos*, which means earthquake, which is a term for apocalyptic upheavals. It was a doozy, and there is almost nothing you can do about it except ride the storm, wait it out. You are at the mercy of nature at that point, and you feel like your little boat just might not make it.

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² My sources are: *Harmony of the Gospels*, J. Calvin; Tim Keller sermons found at redeemer.com and preached to Redeemer Presbyterian Church; John Piper sermon manuscripts found at desiringgod.org; *The Gospel According to John*, DA Carson; *The Gospel According to John*, L Morris; *Exposition of The Gospel According to John*; A. Pink; John, Hughes; *Getting to Know John's Gospel*; R Peterson;

³ After I read in my Bible that Himself took my infirmities and bore my sicknesses, I decided there wasn't any need for both Him and me to bear them, and I've been free ever since! Thank God He took our infirmities and bore our sickness.... A permanent healing will be based on their own faith. No one can maintain a healing which has come as a result of another's faith, gifts of the Spirit and so on, unless his faith is developed through the Word of God to the point where he can maintain his own rights. We must learn to say, "Devil, you can't put that back on me! The Lord has healed me. I won't accept it back." We must learn to stand in faith; to "keep the switch of faith turned on." Kenneth Hagin, *How to Keep Your Healing tract*.

The disciples say: “*Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?*” in Mark and “*Save us, Lord; we are perishing!*” in Matthew.

Let’s take the disciples’ words at face value first. This was a big storm and they were afraid. They went to Jesus as someone they thought could help them out.

What are the big storms in your life, or even the little ones? Where are you terrified and wondering if you might perish? Have you been rejected lately? Have you had your ego crushed by someone or something? Did you try out for the team and not make it? Did you blow it for your team and now they don’t trust you? Did you lose a bunch of money? Are your parents splitting up? Are you having an epistemological breakdown where you don’t know if anything is true anymore? Are you unsure whether you’ll make the grades to get into the major or grad school you want? Is your friend or your family in trouble?

There are all kinds of storms in our lives. Some of them truly are big. Others only seem so, but try telling someone else that it’s no big deal. When you’re in the storm, you are terrified you may be perishing.

These are all from God. Right? Is God in control of the weather? Is he in control of all circumstances? The Bible teaches that He is. Jeremiah 5 says this:

21 “*Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but see not, who have ears, but hear not.*

22 *Do you not fear me? declares the Lord; Do you not tremble before me? I placed the sand as the boundary for the sea, a perpetual barrier that it cannot pass; though the waves toss, they cannot prevail; though they roar, they cannot pass over it.*

23 *But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and gone away.*

24 *They do not say in their hearts, ‘Let us fear the Lord our God, who gives the rain in its season, the autumn rain and the spring rain, and keeps for us the weeks appointed for the harvest.’*

I want you to see that, in the midst of the storm, there is no safer place than with Jesus. It’s not the height of the waves or the degree of the pitch to one side or the other – it’s being with him that makes the disciples safe. And look at what awaits them on the other side – a demoniac. The shore is no safer than the crushing waves. There is danger all about.

We need to be near to him, we need to cry out to him. But we need to listen to what he says to us when we do cry, Save me!

Oligopistoi/O You of Little Faith

So you go to Jesus, but so many times our asking him is more of an accusation. We’re not so much saying, “Save me!” as “Lord, what are you doing! Don’t you see what is going on?! We’re drowning here and you’re sleeping! Is this okay for the Son of God and all that stuff you’ve been saying!” “*Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?*”

We see that not every “Save, Lord” prayer is the same. Here, in fact, Jesus rebukes them for it.

He says, “*Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?*” He turns their question about his care for their physical needs into one back at them about their spiritual needs. This isn’t an experience question, and it might seem odd right there in the middle of the raging winds and torrential rains, but Jesus goes ahead and asks it, taking advantage of the famed “teachable moment.”

“Hence we may learn, that as often as adversity arises, our faith is being tested by God. If ills weigh heavily on us, so as almost to overwhelm us, this is done by the same purpose of God to try our endurance, or to bring our hidden weakness, by this means, into the open; just as we see, when the waves broke over the Apostles, their infirmity was disclosed, which before had been hidden.”⁴

This is an amazing thing. Think about what we have here. We have *the disciples* being called “little faith ones.” They’d already seen miracles, they’d heard his teaching, and yet they struggled with believing him in true faith. I would say that this is actually encouraging us today. For a few reasons. One big one is because we know that the disciples made it. They became numbered in the place of “great faith ones,” even dying terrible deaths for their faith, when it would have been easy to renounce it.

He does not rebuke them for being afraid, but for being men of fear. He rebukes them for looking more at the storm, and not enough at him. He rebukes them because they should have *known* better. You see, faith has an object. It doesn’t just float out there by itself. Whether or not the object is trustworthy and worthy of your faith matters a great deal. I have a friend, a very learned and decorated professor here at OU who teaches that you can separate your beliefs and your faith. You can be a Christian, which would be a faith decision or aligning yourself with a faith tradition in her words, but you don’t have to believe that Jesus was the Son of God, born of a virgin, resurrected literally from death, did miracles, etc.

I keep telling her that faith doesn’t work that way. Faith’s object is what matters. If the object isn’t worthy, if you get new information that contradicts your belief, then you need to reexamine your faith in that object.

So faith isn’t a leap in the dark. It’s not irrational or a crux for the weak. It’s not anti-thinking. It is pro-thinking, it is rational, it examines the evidence and takes into consideration even our own biases, cultural, temporal biases as well.

How is your faith? Are you questioning Jesus? That could be good or bad. Are you looking at the evidence presented before you in the Scriptures? Are you looking at your own life and wondering where to go from here?

We are all “little faith ones.” Don’t worry if your faith is weak.⁵ But don’t think you can muster up more faith on your own effort. The answer to increasing your faith doesn’t reside in you. To strengthen your faith you need to look at the object of it. You need to set your eyes on him, to see who he is and how he loves you and provides for you. Looking more intently at him will increase your faith. Understanding the gospel more is what we need, for we just barely understand it.

⁴ Calvin, 280

⁵ On the one hand, Jesus could have physically died in the storm. But he couldn’t have, for that would not have paid the sins for his people. That would not have been Messiah-esque. The disciples didn’t understand that.

Jesus in the Boat

We've looked at the storm, and we've looked at the disciples. Now let's look at what we learn about Jesus from this. Let's see this object of faith and pray that our faith would increase in doing so.

What do we have here? We read about a tired Jesus, a sleeping Jesus. He is exhausted from teaching and needs a serious snooze. Do you think of Jesus that way? Or do you tend to think of him as an action hero, someone who you can cut but who doesn't bleed? The Bible talks about Jesus experiencing human limitations (hunger, weariness, ignorance of fact, only being in one place at a time), and human pain (weeping at Lazarus' grave, agonizing in Gethsemane, and suffering on the cross). Hebrews stresses that had he not thus experienced human pressures – weakness, temptation, pain – he would not have been qualified to help us as we go through the same things.⁶ He was a man. The disciples had to learn that he was God, for they experienced him as a man. It wasn't that he had to show people that he was a man because their first reaction was that he was obviously God.

The technical theological term for this is the Hypostatic Union. The Westminster Shorter Catechism sums it up this way: Q&A 22: How did Christ, being the Son of God, become man? *Christ, the Son of God, became man, by taking to himself a true body, and a reasonable soul, being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the virgin Mary, and born of her, yet without sin.* The Confession adds this: *So that the two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition or confusion. Which person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.*

Yes, that's great. Jesus was a man. But that isn't too astounding to the disciples. He may be a strange man, a heavy sleeper to catch some shut eye in a storm that had even experienced fishermen crying for their lives. But they don't seem particularly in awe of his manhood.

It's when he calms the storm that their mouths drop. Their eyes get wide. They cannot believe it.

Mark records that Jesus said, *“Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.* Think about what he didn't do. He didn't speak and then an hour later the storm blew over, which could be chalked up to just really fortuitous timing (ala the *Rainmaker* movie). He also didn't pray. He didn't ask God to calm the storm. It wasn't that he was a man who had greater access to God, who had a direct phone line and could get stuff done. If you believe this story accurately portrays what happened, like I do, then you are confronted with something very similar to Genesis 1⁷. God speaks and things instantaneously happen.

So what is the disciples reaction to this amazing thing? Ho hum?

No they ask a profound question. Your translation has in Matthew, *“What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?”* But the Greek literally says, *“What kind is this?”* What kind is this? What are we dealing with here? – this is no ordinary man, in fact, we're wondering if this is a man at all!

And that is the question before us as well. What kind is this? Who is this Jesus? What do you make of him?

Let me ask you this question. If Jesus was just an ordinary guy, if he married Mary Magdalene as purported in *The DaVinci Code*, if he spoke all the things as purported in the Gospel of Thomas, then why was he crucified as a dangerous criminal? What was so incendiary about him that people hated him?

Maybe he really did this stuff. Maybe he was the Son of God, and people couldn't take it. Perhaps he really is who he says he is. If he were, he could surely calm a measly storm, couldn't he? And could he calm the storms of your life?

The further implications of this, once we understand who Jesus is, is that no matter where you are, if Jesus is there you are safe. Conversely, no matter where you are, if Jesus *isn't* there, you aren't safe at all, no matter how safe you feel.

Or let me put it this way: What is scarier – the storm or the “thing” that calms the storm?

The disciples were trying to put all this together and so are we.

You will get to the other side

So we're trying to put all this together. Jesus talks about the parable of the sower. He says “He who has ears let him hear.” Then he teaches about being a true disciple, about following him at all costs. Some men buy it, they hear his words, believe he is worth following, worth putting their faith and trust in him, and they get in a boat to cross the river with him. And a storm hits. He doesn't prevent it, but allows it to bring them to the place where they're considering death.

In the midst of the storm, he asks them about their faith. Nothing about the ballast of the boat, or the main sail (there probably wasn't one) or anything ship-ish about his comment. Faith. They haven't trusted in him, they haven't realized who he is and what his mission is. They have even accused him of not caring. He calls them “little faith ones.” But then he calms the storm, thereby proving his authority over all of nature, and even their hearts.

We might call this construction a template that goes like this. God, Guilt, Grace, Gratitude. We don't always see the full template displayed, but it is there. When you encounter God, your jaw will drop. He is bigger, more unruly, wilder, stronger, stranger than you ever expected. When people truly see him, they feel small in comparison, they feel weak and baffled. They feel sinful in the light of such perfection and miniscule in the shadow of such power. But God gives grace, does he not? He doesn't kick them off the boat, but saves them from peril, while teaching them about the condition of their hearts. That leads us to love him all the more.

Have you seen this in your life? Have you asked, What kind is this? Have you seen Jesus as the one who you are responding to? Did you think your life would get all straightened out once you became a Christian and are mad that it doesn't seem to be doing so? There's an illustration that some people use that shows in a picture that once you become a Christian and put Jesus as Lord of your life, that all the aspects of your life start to align and make sense and get ordered. I hate that picture. My life doesn't look like that. Does yours? Jesus calls us to be his disciples no matter what happens. He doesn't guarantee fun times for you. There will be storms.

⁶ From Packer's *Concise Theology*, 108

⁷ Psalm 107 brings this home big time.

And don't forget what lies on the other side – more trouble. Demon possessed people and death. But Jesus doesn't only have control over nature, he also rules the spirits and he conquers death. That is perhaps disturbing because we want him to wipe out all of that NOW. But he is the God of the storm too.

Are you in a storm now? What is your storm? Where are you having trouble seeing and trusting Jesus? Where is the place where it is becoming evident that you are a "little faith one"?

The disciples made it to the other shore. They were safely on land. Jesus was there and he protected them. Don't forget that. He says that nothing can happen to you that isn't for your good, your ultimate good, not what you think is your immediate good.

Jesus says that he is the author and perfecter of our faith. He says that he will accomplish what he starts. He says that what he has begun he will carry on to completion.

But you have to look to him. You have to see him for who he is.

"The focus here remains squarely Christological – on who Christ is, not on what he will do for us. One who has this kind of power can be no less than God himself, worthy of worship, irrespective of when and how he chooses to use that power in our lives. Sometimes he leaves a storm unstilled for good and godly ends."⁸

We're rebuked, Jesus leaves us scratching our heads, but we're safe.

As long as Jesus is in our boat.

Here's the call, echoed from Mark 4. This is Wisdom talking from Proverbs 8, and I'm convinced that the personification of Wisdom is in fact Jesus himself:

32 "And now, O sons, listen to me:

blessed are those who keep my ways.

*33 Hear instruction and be wise,
and do not neglect it.*

*34 Blessed is the one who listens to me,
watching daily at my gates,
waiting beside my doors.*

*35 For whoever finds me finds life
and obtains favor from the Lord,*

*36 but he who fails to find me injures himself;
all who hate me love death."*

⁸ Blomberg, *Matthew Commentary*, p. 150