

Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored to the shore. And when they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognised him and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.

(Mark 6:45–56)

Introduction

In the text before us, there is a whole lot going on: Jesus praying all alone on the mountain, his miracle of walking on the water, and his causing the wind to cease. Coupled with this is that strange statement that Jesus "meant to pass by" the disciples (v. 48). What does that mean?

We will look at all of these themes, but the fundamental picture around which this passage centres is that of the disciples rowing against a headwind not able to make any physical progress. And this is matched by their apparent lack of spiritual progress (v. 52).

Commentators remark that artwork from the early days of the church often portrayed the church as a boat in a storm. R. Kent Hughes explains that the old English word "nave" was used to describe the part of a church building where the congregation sat. The word "nave," he informs, means "boat."

Throughout history, the church has found itself in the middle of storms, which seem to impede her progress. The winds of spiritual opposition in the form of political oppression,

or financial hardship, or relational betrayal, or doctrinal heresy, etc., have blown hard against the church. The church has had to row hard in the face of such adversaries. But she has rowed and, as she has done so, Jesus, the Captain of our salvation has come alongside. With him in the boat, the church has made incredible progress.

The same has been and remains true on an individual level. Christian, I am sure that you can relate. As you have sought to follow Jesus, you have no doubt found yourself—and perhaps today you find yourself—facing headwinds of discouragement, failure, heartache, and various shades of dark spiritual, relational, financial hindrances to get to the other side.

But this passage fundamentally addresses, not only the church and the Christian rowing against things outside of our control, but rather our struggle because of our failure to exercise spiritual self-control. In other words, hardness of heart (v. 52) makes our spiritual journey more difficult than it needs to be. We need to see Jesus for who is. He is God. Our prayer must be, “Show us Christ!”

In this text, we will observe several things that we must keep before us when we are called to row hard against the winds of life—winds, by the way, which our Saviour, who is Creator, has caused.

The Intercession of Jesus

First, we must remember the intercession of Jesus. We see this in at least two ways.

Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land.

(Mark 6:45–47)

Jesus Protects His Disciples

Be encouraged: Jesus protects the vulnerable.

The miracle of the loaves had been experienced. Though we are unaware of what the crowd knew, the disciples were very aware that Jesus has performed an amazing miracle. Like Yahweh in the wilderness, here Jesus fed those with him in this wilderness.

Jesus dismissed the disciples and “made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side.” Presumably, they had the twelve baskets of leftover food with them.

The word picture indicates that some persuasion was necessary: He “made” them get into the boat. It was not because they were hesitant about being in a boat (though it was getting late). Rather, when you are experiencing success, it’s hard to tear yourself away from it.

But there may be another reason, which we should consider. As John mentions, the multitudes were keen to make Jesus king (John 6:14–15). They did not want to do this by submitting their will to his. Political salvation was more on their minds than was reconciliation with God.

Therefore, it is quite likely that Jesus was intent on protecting his still rather clueless disciples (4:10–13; 1:35–39). They were no doubt in danger of being caught up in the wrong kind of messianic fervour. They still had a lot to learn. They weren’t yet ready for these tempting winds of misguided popularity. Therefore, “immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side.”

There is a lesson here for us, and in some ways, it undergirds this entire pericope: In the mist of Christian fervour, it is easy to miss the point. And the point is Jesus Christ. They were experiencing a miracle and yet were in danger of being blind to the identity of Jesus. They were in danger of marvelling at his works while missing the point, which is worship. They were in danger of experiencing the blessing while giving little heed to the Blesser. They were in danger of enjoying the meal while not paying attention to the Master. They were in danger of being caught up with the crowd while never truly knowing Christ. This is frighteningly relevant.

Perhaps this protective concern of the Good Shepherd is the reason that he allowed us to go through times out at sea away from what were previous blessings: ministry successes, great times of learning, many prayers answered, church growth, relational harmony; etc. By doing so, we are in a position where we can learn that having Christ is enough. By doing so, the song “All I Have is Christ” becomes more than a nice-sounding song. Rather, we learn that at the end of the day, he is all we need.

Jesus Prays for His Disciples

Be encouraged, Jesus prays for the vulnerable.

The Multitude Dismissed

Jesus then “dismissed the crowd” – the multitude of men. He would not be swayed from his mission: to give his life a ransom for the many (10:45). He had taught the crowd and had fed these would-be sheep. There was no more for him to do—at the moment. The crowd wanted a revolution, but they needed redemption. So Jesus dispersed them, rejecting their offer at coronation. For what they needed was his crucifixion. But that hour had not yet come and so Jesus headed for the mountaintop to worship.

As was becoming his custom, following intense ministry Jesus retreated to spend time with the Father (1:35–39; 2:13; 3:13; 4:10). As we have seen, ministry can be exhausting, and so Jesus went to pray. He needed to be energised, to be renewed, to be refreshed. But this is not the only reason. Again, popularity can be seductive. This was behind the devil's temptation of Jesus: glory now, not later; the crown without the cross. Jesus knew the Father's agenda, and so he prayed to stay on that agenda. Jesus understood the difference between what Luther called the theology of glory and the theology of the cross. We need that too.

We live in constant danger of triumphalism—for example: health, wealth, prosperity gospel; over-realised eschatology; etc. While we want to sing, “And now I am happy all the day,” the New Testament calls us to die daily. Paul knew what it was for friends to do him evil and to have everyone abandon him. Many Christians know the challenges of marriage or raising children, who are sinners! Times of great growth in a church and financial strength are often followed by empty seats and lower bank balances; times of great advance are often followed by seeming retreat.

Just as Jesus would be strengthened by alone time with his Father, so will we. We will be renewed in our commitment to follow, regardless of the cost.

Where's the Crowd?

Jesus “was alone on the land.” Think about that for a moment. Get a mental picture of this.

We shouldn't rush past this verse. Notice that, after some time alone praying, when Jesus returned, the crowds were gone. I don't want to overstate the case, but I must wonder, why did no one hang around for his return? Now that their stomachs were filled, did they have all they wanted from Jesus? If you could have a private audience with Jesus, wouldn't you hang around?

It is not surprising that the crowds would leave. After all, most would-be followers of Jesus don't put much of a premium on prayer. The disciples would eventually understand its importance, but it is significant that, when Jesus went to pray, there was never a crowd attending him. Sadly, this remains the case in our day. The prayer meeting is always the most neglected gathering of the congregation. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be!

But there is another reason that Jesus prayed. He had just sent the disciples out to sea, where they would face an opposing wind. Jesus prayed for them as they did so.

Christian, Jesus may be visibly absent, but he is existentially present. He knows what you are experiencing and is praying for you. He makes intercession for all who come to him. We are not alone (Romans 8:31–32; Hebrews 7:25).

The Intention of Jesus

Second, we should remember the intention of Jesus: “And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them” (v. 48).

Don’t expect an easy journey, but do expect an enlightening one. This may sound strange but, in a very good sense, Jesus passes by the vulnerable.

One of the lines in the well-known hymn says, “While on others Thou art calling, do not pass me by.” This is a legitimate and important cry from the heart of the repentant sinner. And yet, in this passage, it was precisely Jesus passing by that these disciples needed if they would truly know him. We too need for Jesus to pass us by. If we properly understand this passage, our prayer will be, “Jesus, please pass by me!” Or, “Show us Christ.”

Jesus saw the disciples struggling against a headwind. It didn’t appear to be a storm like the one experienced in chapter 4:35–41. Nevertheless, they were being delayed in their journey. God in Christ was delaying them, deliberately.

At first glance, this can be a very perplexing verse. After all, Jesus had made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side. And now they were in difficulty. Certainly, the one whom the sea and wind obeyed could have made it smooth sailing for his followers (4:41). Do you ever find yourself thinking such thoughts? After all, if “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” then why on earth doesn’t he make life easier? Why all the contrary winds? Why is it so difficult to get to my destination? After all, like these disciples, when we obey his word—when we are on mission at his direction—then why on earth does he not make it easier to get there (sanctification, honourable marriage, evangelism, making disciples, raising a godly seed, church growth, church planting, etc.)? In fact, since he is the one whom the winds obey (4:41), why does Jesus send headwinds straight into our face? Why do we seem to row so hard in the Christian life and yet make such slow progress towards our destination?

Why? Because Jesus wants to pass us by. In keeping with the Mosaic and wilderness motif of the previous passage, here we have one of the most amazing acts of mercy that we find in the New Testament. It is the mercy of self-disclosure; the mercy of self-revelation. It is what theologians call a theophany. Let me explain.

The Miracle

Unbelief is tragic and ridiculous. Just as people have denied the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand by explaining it as merely a wonderful display of hospitality, many deny the miracle of Jesus walking on the water by saying that he was walking on a sand

bar just below the surface of the water. If so, then the miracle would be that fisherman, as were several of the disciples, would have been fooled!

Jesus walked on the water for the simple reason that Jesus is God (Psalm 77:16–20; Job 9:8–11). He who demands obedience from the waters demonstrated his sovereignty over it by literally walking over it – by walking on top of it!

This action was meant to display to the disciples that Jesus was not merely a miracle worker. He was not merely an amazing and authoritative teacher. He was not merely a supernatural caterer. No, Jesus walking on the water tells us that he was God in the flesh. And the disciples needed to know this. They needed to see this. They needed to believe this. And so do we.

There is danger of losing sight of the supreme authority of Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18) – especially as we obey him on his mission.

Jesus had sent them (v. 45), and now he was there to sustain them. They were not alone on their journey. In words that these disciples would only later fully appreciate, behold Jesus would be with them to the end of the age (Matthew 20:20).

Jesus, who is God, is with you as you obey him in your marriage. Jesus, who is God, is with you as you obey him raising a godly seed. Jesus, who is God, is with you as you row hard to make disciples. Jesus, who is God, is with us as we navigate the challenges of church life (including loving the unlovely, applying church discipline, embarking on the ministry of the Word, etc.). Jesus, who is God, is with us as we row hard towards the holiness of Christlikeness. Jesus, who is God, is with us as we row against the headwinds of a godless culture of disorder and destruction and death. Jesus, who is God, is with us as we toil to get the gospel to the ends of the earth – amid economic and political challenges.

Christian, church, let's be encouraged that we are not alone out to sea. If we are following Jesus' command, we will never walk alone. And Jesus, who is God, still does miracles.

However, it is one thing to know the text of Scripture and to say that we believe Jesus is God, but it can be quite another thing to really believe this. Therefore, we need to pay attention when Jesus passes by. That is, the miracle is inseparable from the manifestation. As we will see as we continue, though the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, it is clear they did not recognise him. That is a shame. And it is all too often our shame as well. But perhaps we should not be too quick to criticise. After all, as the text says, "he meant to pass by them." Can we blame the disciples for their panic? Well, yes!

The Manifestation

As we have seen, Jesus walked on the water and came to them. But then we read these strange words: “He meant to pass by them” (v. 48). What does this mean?

It could mean that Jesus meant to deliberately bypass them so that they would not see him (though he would see them). In that case, the intent was to test their trust—like spying on them to see how they were handling this new difficulty. It was dark and early in morning and no doubt they were tired. How would they hold up amid the strain? How would they treat one another? Would they row as a team or argue and complain and fight among themselves?

As appealing as this interpretation might be—and as true to life—I don’t think that is what Jesus was doing.

Another possibility is that Jesus meant to pass by them in order to see if they would reach out to him. After all, they were in a tough situation. Would they try to deliver themselves or would they see their need and reach out for the help? Again, I don’t think this is a correct interpretation, though I can appreciate the sentiment. Jesus desires to be desired; he is God and wants us to love him with all our being. But this is not what these words mean. For in fact, Jesus was growing weary of being desired only for what he could give to people. He wanted to be desired—to be known and adored and worshipped and loved—simply for who he was: God.

The real answer, I suspect, lies in keeping with the motif of Moses and the wilderness (vv. 30–44). To understand what was happening, therefore, we need to look to an Old Testament account—to look at Exodus 32:12–34:9 and 1 Kings 19:1–11ff.

The phrase used by Mark (“pass by”) is akin to language in Exodus (33:19, 22; 34:6). In that “passing by,” the Lord was revealing himself to Moses in such a way that he would come to know God in a clearer way (33:13). This revelation of God would empower Moses for his assignment in the wilderness and, if he persevered faithfully, into the Promised Land as well. God was giving to Moses a vision of himself.

The same language is used in 1 Kings 19:11. The context there is that of a discouraged prophet, who felt as though he was rowing against the proverbial wind of spiritual and political opposition. He felt alone, abandoned, and discouraged. He felt like a complete failure. Emotional darkness was setting in. And just when he was at his most hopeless, the Lord “passed by.” That is, the Lord revealed himself. It was a manifestation of his glorious presence. Jesus “passed by them to assure them of his presence with them” (Lane).

This is what Elijah really needed. It would have been wonderful to see a revival. It would have been great to witness God destroying all the evil that was encompassing Israel. It

would have been great if Israel was returned to her former glory. But as wonderful as all those things would have been, what Elijah needed the most, what Moses needed the most, what these disciples on Galilee needed the most, and what you and I need the most is the manifestation of the glory of God. And we have this today in his full and final revelation in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1–2; John 14:8–9).

This, I believe, is precisely what Jesus was doing here.

Jesus, having sent the disciples across the lake, took time to be refreshed by the revelation of the Father. With this fresh revelation, with refreshed vision of his mission, Jesus headed to the sea in order that his disciples might come to a clearer understanding of who he was. Therefore, as his Father did with Moses, so Jesus did with the disciples. Jesus was showing his disciples the glory of God – his own glory!

We will look at their response in a moment, but let's pause to apply this to our own lives. Christian, we need to pray, continually, "Show us Christ!" We need this theophany daily, more than we need anything. Our cry needs to be, with Paul,

that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 3:10–14)

Church, we need this (see Ephesians 1:14ff; 3:14ff). Sadly, all too often we respond to Jesus in our midst as the disciples did. This brings us to our third need.

The Injunction of Jesus

Third, we need to remember the injunction of Jesus. Be encouraged that Jesus pacifies and preserves the vulnerable.

But when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

Don't Panic but Worship

Notice the phrase, “for they all saw him, and were terrified.” They saw him, and yet they did not see him. As Witherington comments, “Their response was not to shout, ‘Hooray!’, but to scream in panic.”

When the disciples saw Jesus, they freaked out—not because they were in the presence of God (cf. Isaiah 6:1–8), but because they thought they were in the presence of a phantom.

This is the only occurrence of the word translated “ghost” in the New Testament. It was used in the ancient world to describe spirits of the waters—sea demons, if you will. This is bizarre on several levels, but before we are too critical, let's consider how often we don't get it.

Unlike Moses, who experienced a similar theophany, the countenance of these disciples did not shine. They did not glow; rather, their countenances were marked by terror—trauma rather than tranquillity; panic rather than peace; horror rather than happiness. They were disturbed rather than comforted. This is always the case when we lose our vision of God in Christ (see Psalm 42).

Christian, when we fail to reckon on the glorious presence of God in Christ, we will panic as we row our way through life. Rather than seeing God at work for our good in the storms, we will focus on the evil. Be careful.

Stop Seeing Ghosts and Start Seeing God

Verse 52 informs us of the problem: “They did not understand ... but their hearts were hardened.” And it was for this reason that they were “astonished” in a wrong kind of way. As France says, “By this time, apparently, the disciples, if not the crowd, should have got beyond the stage of instinctive astonishment to one of understanding who Jesus is.”

We should remember that discipleship is threatened more by unbelief than by dangers. May God help us to keep our hearts soft, and thus safe! Let us beware the danger of reading the news apart from reading it through the filter of Scripture. Let us beware the danger of hearing the doctor's report without seeing Jesus standing behind the doctor. Let us beware the danger of seeing death as controlled by the devil rather than by God. Let us beware the danger of seeing the devil and not the Lord!

We were not saved by a phantom; we were saved by God the Son. Our circumstances are not sovereign; God is.

Jesus' response was gracious, even though he must have felt grieved. His shepherd's care was evident in the words, "Immediately he spoke to them and said, 'Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.'" With that, "he got into the boat and with them, and the wind ceased."

William Lane points out that the response of Jesus harkens to Old Testament theophanies which were also accompanied by exhortations to not fear or to take heart. These statements were formulaic for God's self-revelation (Psalms 115:9; 118:5; Isaiah 41:4, 13; 43:1; 44:2; 51:9). Again, this is the point of the story. God in Christ was in their midst. As Edwards puts it, "The one who calmed the storm is the one who now appears in the storm, the 'I Am' of God." In other words, "Like Yahweh in the OT, Jesus comes to deliver his people in need, and the deliverance becomes a self-revelation." The disciples needed to pay attention. They needed to focus on him. To the degree they did so, faith would replace fear.

Christian, let us pray, "Show us Christ." Let's pursue those sweet hours of prayer and enjoy the blessing of being still and knowing that Jesus Christ is God. As we come to know Jesus and his omnipotent presence, we will be able to join the songwriter in singing, "Be still my soul, the Lord is on your side."

I don't know what storms you are facing as you read this. Perhaps you are facing the struggles and fears of single motherhood. Perhaps you are staring down the barrel of relational devastation. Perhaps you are looking at mistreatment and betrayals. Perhaps you are struggling with sin or with a temptation to suicide. Perhaps you are concerned about your financial, relational, career, or family future. Perhaps you are seeing ghosts in the church when God is at work purging it.

Whatever headwinds you are rowing against, pray for a vision of Christ, who is able to calm the storms.

The Inevitability of Jesus

Finally, we must remember the inevitability of Jesus:

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored to the shore. And when they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognized him and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.

(Mark 6:53–56)

Eventually, and inevitably, Jesus and the disciples “crossed over” (v. 53). Like so many times before, the crowds come upon them looking for physical blessing. Most were hardened as far as understanding why Jesus came. And yet Jesus graciously and mercifully ministered to them. Lane observes, “Jesus patiently bears with their limited insight and graciously heals those who reach out to him from the bed of affliction.” And the disciples accompanied him in this. Jesus continued to train the Twelve. They would be slow to learn (8:21, 31–33), but their hearts would soften over time and they would be used by God to turn the world upside down.

Mark summarises Jesus’ ministry at Gennesaret in v. 56 with the words “made well.” This translates the word that is sometimes translated, “save” (e.g. Matthew 1:21). I can’t but help to wonder if Peter had this on his mind during the episode much later when he and John, after Jesus’ death, burial, resurrection and ascension, were faithfully witnessing of Christ in the temple (Acts 3). A paralysed man was begging. Peter told him that they didn’t have money, but they had something even greater: the gospel. Therefore, in the name of Jesus, he commanded the paralytic to stand. The man responded obediently, leaping with joy.

Later when Peter and John were challenged by the Jewish religious authorities, they declared,

Let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

(Acts 4:10–12)

These disciples had crossed over into spiritual maturity where the gospel was predominate to them. Healings are wonderful, but salvation is amazing. They now understood that Jesus was God, and this his name was divine. They would often find themselves rowing against the wind, but they would no longer see ghosts. No, the gospel had empowered them to see God. This is precisely what we need.

Mark himself would experience this. There was a time when the headwinds of ministry drove him back home (Acts 13:13–14), but toward the end of his life Paul recognised his usefulness for ministry (2 Timothy 4:11).

Believer, church, keep gathering, keep praying, keep reading, keep studying, keep keeping on, keep obeying.

Ultimately, we need to understand that Jesus Christ is God who saves. Jesus, who walked on the waters, was willing to be submerged in the waters of his Father's holy wrath so that we might be saved.

It is by frequent reflection upon this amazing love that our hearts are softened and our faith strengthened. Let's do all we can to point one another to this glorious gospel.

I will be forever indebted to the tenacious, loving, truth-speaking ministry of Bill Graves, the man who personally disciplined me.

Thirty-nine years ago, the Lord graciously rescued me from me and from my sin. The Hound of heaven, like the metaphorical sheepdog of Psalm 23, hunted me down with his goodness and mercy. God the Holy Spirit brought me to my spiritual knees because my elder brother was sent by my heavenly Father who would not let me go. I'm grateful for what God did in bringing me to repentance and faith. And this is where Bill Graves comes in.

Someone in my university residence informed Bill that I was now walking with the Lord and he came alongside and offered to disciple me. I, with one or two others, would get together, often at his house to study the Bible as he sought to ground us in the gospel and to train us for evangelism and discipleship of others. I had some good weeks, and I had some bad weeks. But Bill persevered.

At times I was zealous to learn and to follow Jesus, and at other times, well, not so much. Bill would often hold me accountable for church attendance, for my quiet time, and for holy living. Bill would help me to witness to others, training me along the way. Regrettably, I was not always the most astute student of God's word nor the most faithful when it came to taking up my cross and following Jesus. At times my spiritual heart was hardened, and my spiritual eyes were blind. Yet Bill tirelessly pointed me to Christ, prayerfully labouring that I might grow in my faith and in my love for the Saviour. Humanly speaking, I don't know where I would be today if it was not for this brother. This brother, who at times must have been frustrated with my spiritual obstinance and obtuseness, maintained a soft and open heart to me, even when he had to speak some very hard words. Reflecting on this, Bill was like Jesus. With tenderness of heart, Jesus persevered with his disciples, those with hardened hearts.

Like Jesus, Bill got into my boat and kept at it, hoping that I would finally get it. I think I did.

Let's be a Bill Graves to others and let's humbly receive the ministry from such. When this occurs corporately, then we will increasingly understand who Jesus is. And that will make all the difference as we are sometimes called to row against the wind on the sea of life.

Rowing Against the Wind

Mark 6:45–56

Doug Van Meter

AMEN