

Mark 4:35-41

Verse 35

In verse 35, Mark transitions to share a story about how Jesus exercised power over nature. Previously in Mark's Gospel, we have seen our Lord's power over the spirit realm (Mark 1:21-28). Now we seem Him exercising authority over wind and water. Verse 35 says, "On that day, when evening had come, he told them, "Let's cross over to the other side of the sea" (Mark 4:35). The phrase "on that day" tells us that the day in view is the same one that began in verse 3:20. It had been a very busy day of teaching for Jesus (see 4:33).

"When evening had come," Jesus beckoned his disciples to join Him on a boat. The time of day was likely late afternoon.¹ Jesus wanted them to join Him so they could "cross over to the other side of the sea." The body of water was the Sea of Galilee, also known as the Sea of Tiberias. The Jordan river flowed through this body of water. Today, the Sea of Galilee is about fifteen miles in length and six miles in breadth.² This is the same sea upon which Jesus would later walk (6:45-52), and it is the location of one of His post-resurrection appearances to His disciples (John 21:1-14).

Perhaps Jesus and His disciples were trying to cross the sea before nightfall. They probably planned to get their night's sleep on the other side of the sea. In crossing over the sea, Jesus and the disciples would have traveled in a southeastern fashion. The motive of their trip is not explicitly mentioned. Maybe they were simply trying to escape the mob scene (4:1), so that Jesus could get some rest. Perhaps they were intentionally traveling to another region (5:1), so that Jesus could minister to more people. It is also possible that Jesus could have initiated the boat trip for the sole purpose of testing the faith of His disciples, in a way similar to the testing of Abraham's faith in Genesis 22:1.

Based on the current location of Jesus and His disciples (Capernaum - see 2:1), and based on their pending destination (Decapolis - see 5:20), it seems this boat ride likely involved a seven to eleven mile jaunt across the Sea of Galilee in a diagonal fashion. Notice that Jesus instigates the boat trip across the Sea of Galilee. He intentionally takes His disciples right into the middle of a storm. Our text teaches us that the sovereign hand of God is with us in the midst of our suffering. Though we may not sense it, He is in control and He has plans for His purposes. Mark's original readers were suffering cruel hardship at the hands of Nero. Maybe our text was meant to comfort them.

Some have a twisted view of their Heavenly Father. Because they are led by earthly assumptions, they mistakingly believe God should protect them from all forms of harm. Modern, misguided parenting techniques often try to protect children from any type of harm whatsoever. Many Christians think God should operate similarly. They mistakingly believe He shouldn't allow them to go through anything difficult. Jesus knew His disciples needed a trial that would teach them some important truth. They needed a crisis to learn that Jesus was Creator God. They needed a storm to teach them to live by faith, not fear.

Interestingly, in one of his epistles, Peter would later say, "Dear friends, don't be surprised when the fiery ordeal comes among you to test you as if something unusual were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12). The fisherman turned apostle personally learned that Jesus sometimes leads His disciples to the proverbial threshold of hell in order to teach them some important life lessons. The spirit of American pragmatism often dupes modern believers into thinking that God wouldn't ever ordain anything difficult in our lives. Our current narrative teaches us otherwise. Sometimes Jesus beckons us to jump into a boat He knows is heading straight for a storm. All the while, He has providential purposes and plans for our lives.

Verse 36

¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 75.

² Ryle, 68.

Verse 36 continues our narrative, saying, “So they left the crowd and took him along since he was in the boat. And other boats were with him” (Mark 4:36). Notice how “other boats” went with Jesus and His disciples. The vessels possibly carried a traveling band of gypsy groupies who had started following Jesus at this point. Remember the crowds that flocked to see Jesus’ ministry in 1:33; 2:4; 2:15; 3:7; 3:20; and 4:1. We are not told whether or not the people in the other boats were genuine disciples or mere religious spectators. Quite possibly, some of them were other Christ followers who had joined Jesus’ movement (3:34 and 4:10).³

Verse 37

As the band of travelers crossed the sea, a horrific storm descended on the waters. Mark records, “A great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking over the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped” (Mark 4:37). The Greek word translated “great” is the one from which we get our word “mega.” The storm in our text was a mega storm, a furious one.⁴ The same word is used in the Septuagint’s rendering of Jonah 1:4 to speak of the way in which “the Lord threw a great wind onto the sea.”⁵ Some see a parallel between the story in our text and the Jonah narrative.

The language was often used of a hurricane or a squall.⁶ It depicted cyclone-like activity.⁷ It may seem strange that a body of water like the Sea of Galilee could experience such storm, but the topology of the area proves otherwise. The sea rested nearly seven hundred feet below the Mediterranean Sea.⁸ A large mountain range that contained the Golan Heights stood to the east. It also contained Mount Hermon, a mountain whose peak rests 9,200 feet above sea level. The rift containing the mountains stood about three thousand feet above sea level.⁹ The level of the Sea of Galilee resulted in high air temperatures. As such air mixed with the cooler mountain air to the east, violent storms often ensued.¹⁰ Even to this day, locals speak of the notorious storms that appear on the Sea of Galilee. Arabic-speaking people use the Arabic word for shark (“Sharkia”) as a designation for the violent windstorms.¹¹

As the storm began to rage, “waves were breaking over the boat.” The verbiage literally means “to strike upon.”¹² It depicts the waters beating the vessel, knocking it around in the turbulent sea. The deluge was so powerful that “the boat was already being swamped.” Mark uses a passive voice verb to describe the action. The language means “to be made full.”¹³ The scene depicts the boat filling up with water. The professional fisherman knew if things continued as they were the ship would most likely capsize.

³ Edwards, 148.

⁴ Schnabel, 113.

⁵ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

⁶ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 75.

⁷ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

⁸ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

⁹ Schnabel, 113.

¹⁰ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

¹¹ Edwards, 149.

¹² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 75.

¹³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 75.

Verse 38

While the storm raged, Jesus slumbered. Mark tells us, “He was in the stern, sleeping on the cushion. So they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher! Don’t you care that we’re going to die?” (Mark 4:38). Jesus was sleeping because He was tired. He’d had a very busy day, a day that began in 3:20 and involved teaching in a house (3:20), defending Himself against His critics (3:21-35), a lot of walking, and teaching in “many parables” at different locales (v. 4:33).¹⁴ In His omniscience, Jesus knew no storm could hurt Him, so He slept with sweet sleep.

The fact that Jesus slept is a witness to His humanity. Rest was made for man and woman (Genesis 2:1-3 and Exodus 20:8-11). God does not sleep (Psalm 121:4). Jesus slept because He had a human nature. When He was on earth, He was not a mere phantom or angelic apparition. He was 100% God, but He was also 100% man. He had to embrace humanity in order to deliver us from our sinful bodies (Hebrews 10:5). If He hadn’t been man, He could not have died as “the righteous for the unrighteous” (1 Peter 3:18).

Mark shares an interesting detail when he says Jesus was “sleeping on the cushion.” No other gospel writer includes this tidbit of information.¹⁵ Ships in Jesus’ day had a deck area at the front of the ship.¹⁶ A 1986 archaeological dig uncovered a sea-faring vessel on the northwest rim of the Sea of Galilee. It was discovered near the exact location where Jesus and His disciples launched into the waters! Carbon dating has placed the boat at over 2,000 years in age. The boat was over twenty six feet long, over seven feet wide, and over four feet high.¹⁷ In such a boat, the stern usually contained a leather head rest that served as a resting spot for those not involved in fishing or navigation.¹⁸

Confident in Who He was, and what He was called to do, Jesus was not afraid to slumber in the midst of the hardworking disciples. He knew He needed energy for preaching, teaching, and healing. The disciples, however, were disturbed. One exclaimed, “Teacher! Don’t you care that we’re going to die?” The interrogative contains a formula used as an accusation in the ancient world.¹⁹ There is an air of rude condescension in the address.²⁰ The language literally means “We are in the process of perishing.”²¹

The disciples were experienced fishermen (1:16 and 18), so it is quite remarkable that they became so unnerved by the storm. The seven mile trek across the Sea of Galilee was one they had likely made hundreds and hundreds of times. It was akin to our modern-day commute.²² They had likely been acclimated with the body of water from their youth.²³ The fear of the disciples underscores the severity of the storm. A true man’s man would have at least faked an aura of cool collectiveness. Thus, they were undoubtedly convinced they had met their doom.

¹⁴ Schnabel, 114.

¹⁵ Ferguson, 60.

¹⁶ Schnabel, 114.

¹⁷ Edwards, 148.

¹⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 75.

¹⁹ Schnabel, 114.

²⁰ Edwards, 149.

²¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 75.

²² Ferguson, 60.

²³ Ryle, 65.

If Peter was the one who rebuked Jesus, as it is often assumed, the impetuous apostle once again exhibits his control-freak tendencies (see Matthew 17:4 and 26:35 for other examples). From the disciples' response we see the essence of fear. The emotion is based on an impulsive desire to control people and situations that are beyond our control. Such desire is the antithesis of biblical faith that pleases God (Hebrews 11:6).

The disciples' fear highlights their folly. They suffered from a bad case of mistaken identity in reference to Jesus. They didn't see Him for Who He really was. They fancied Him as a Messianic figure, perhaps on par with the Maccabean leaders, but they didn't esteem Him as creator God. If they had, they would have had greater confidence during the storm.

The disciples committed the common error we often make — they focused more on the temporal things of life than the eternal things. Jesus instructed us concerning this temptation in Matthew's Gospel — "So don't worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you" (Matthew 6:31-33).

Verse 39

Responding to His disciples' complaint, "Jesus got up" and "rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Silence! Be still!'" (Mark 4:39). This is the first nature miracle recorded in Mark. Though Jesus had previously subdued wild animals in the dessert (1:13), that event was not presented as a sign and wonder. Our story shows Jesus' authority over the creative order. His power over the spirit world will be seen in 5:1-20, and His power over physical bodies will be displayed in 5:21-43.

Notice Jesus' command for "silence." The same language is used in Mark 1:25 to speak of an exorcism. In the original language of the text, it literally means "be muzzled." It appears as a perfect tense imperative verb, thus depicting a permanent action with abiding results. It could be rendered "put a muzzle on and keep it on!"²⁴

By calming the waters, Jesus proved He was God in the flesh. Just as the Lord arranged the waters at the beginning of time, making large bodies of water (Genesis 1:6), Jesus moved and managed the waters on the Sea of Galilee. He will later demonstrate His power over creation a second time by walking on water (6:45-52).

In these nature miracles, we see a great apologetical argument for the plausibility of miracles. If there is a creator, and we believe there is one because of the cosmological sophistication of our universe, it stands to reason that such a creator can exercise authority over His creation. If a professing believer believes in God, there is no need to not believe in the miraculous. Once one is settled on the fact that God made all things, it is easy to believe that He performed miracles. Norman Geisler and Frank Turek have said, "We live in a theistic universe where miracles are possible...Indeed, the greatest miracle of all — creation of the universe out of nothing — has already occurred."²⁵

In response to Jesus' command, "the wind ceased, and there was a great calm." The same language is used in the Septuagint's rendering of Genesis 8:1 to depict the tranquility of the water after Noah's flood. The same Greek word from which we get our word "mega" that was used in verse 37 is used here again. Though there was a "great windstorm" (mega windstorm), Jesus rendered it inoperative and created a "great calm" (mega calm). Psalm 107:29-30 depicts the Lord as one Who has the power to calm waters — "He stilled the storm to a whisper, and the waves of the sea were hushed. They rejoiced when the waves grew quiet. Then he guided them to the harbor they longed for." By bringing a "great calm" on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus demonstrated that He was God.

²⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 75.

²⁵ Geisler, Norman L. and Frank Turek. *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books), 317.

Jesus was and is the very one Who hovered “over the surface of the waters” at the beginning of time (Genesis 1:2). Our miracle enforces the truth of Colossians 1:16 and John 1:3. Jesus was not just a clever teacher, a dynamic leader, or stellar moral example. He was, and He is, creator God. Paul said, “For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him” (Colossians 1:16). John said, “All things were created through him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created” (John 1:3).

Verse 40

After stopping the storm, Jesus asked His disciples, “Why are you afraid?” (Mark 4:40). He rebuked them for their fear. It is important to note that not all fear is bad. The emotion is a God-given response. It can certainly be justified in certain situations. In our text, however, Jesus rebukes His disciples for an unhealthy type of fear. Their apprehension wasn’t justified, because they were in the presence of the Son of Man (2:28). They had seen His miracles, so they should have trusted Him.

In the context of our passage, the word translated “fear” speaks of one who is cowardly, timid, or without courage.²⁶ It depicted a person “losing heart.”²⁷ The Bible is replete with commands for God’s people to have courage and to not fear (Deuteronomy 31:6; Joshua 1:6; Psalm 91:5; Genesis 15:1; Joshua 8:1; and Matthew 28:5).

Remember what we learned earlier in Mark. Jesus’ miracles functioned as both signs and wonders (Hebrews 2:4). Each miracle was first designed to evoke wonder. That is, they were meant to make people stand in awe of Jesus’ power. When one saw His mighty deeds, one would be led to think that His ministry was of supernatural origin. Secondly, each miracle also served as a sign. Thus, they were intended to teach important lessons about God and man. The miracle in our current text was intended to show the futility of fear. Since our God can control nature, He can calm our troubled hearts.

Perhaps Mark wanted his readers to gain special comfort from this story. Many were living under the threats of the Roman Emperor Nero. Christians had seen other Christians martyred. The Church was being blamed for national struggles. Believers were being maligned. A plethora of false accusations were being leveled against them. Persecution and death were real possibilities. Perhaps Jesus’ question — “Do you still have not faith?” — was helpful for first-century readers.

Some debate the object of faith in our text. Did Jesus encourage a confidence in His past miracles? A reliance on providence? Upon what, or in whom, were the disciples to place their trust. It seems that Jesus simply encouraged a faith in Himself. Note the important spiritual lesson — Bible faith is fixed on a person, not a paradigm or precept. It is not a reliance on fate or some unseen spiritual force. It is an objective confidence in the person of Jesus.

Jesus’ question — “Do you still have not faith?” — was helpful for first-century readers. It can be helpful for us as well. To be strong for Jesus, we need to know how to fight fear with faith. Faith, as mentioned in our text, is simply the act of trusting in God. Jesus will later rebuke His disciples again in Mark’s Gospel for a lack of this virtue (9:19 and 16:14).²⁸ Our passage instructs us concerning the place and primacy of faith in Christian living. It is “the victory that has conquered the world” (1 John 5:4), the means and method of pleasing God (Hebrews 11:6), the gateway to salvation (Ephesians 2:8), and the essence of Christian living (Romans 1:17 and 2 Corinthians 5:7).

²⁶ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 75.

²⁷ Edwards, 152.

²⁸ Edwards, 152.

Verse 41

In response to Jesus' mighty work, the disciples asked, "Who then is this? Even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4:41). A similar response to Jesus' work is seen in 1:27. The response reveals the overall point of this incident — God ordained it to teach an important lesson about human fear, but it primarily served the purpose of exalting Jesus' Divine nature.

This disciples' question shows how slow they were to ascertain the true nature of the Messiah's identity and mission. They wouldn't start to grasp Who Jesus really was, and what He intended to do, until 8:29-33. Even then, they'd still have a lot to learn. It wouldn't be until the post-resurrection appearances and the day of Pentecost that they really "got it." It is for this reason that Jesus masked His identity from the religious leaders of the day (3:12 and 4:10-12). He knew He needed a certain amount of time with His disciples. They weren't ready to be left alone. They needed to be prepared, so He didn't fully disclose Who He was to those who wanted to kill Him (3:6).

Though they had started to follow Jesus (1:16-20 and 3:13-19), and though they had likely repented and believed the good news of the kingdom (1:15), the disciples were still not fully aware of Jesus' identity. They perhaps viewed Him as a sort of Maccabean-like deliverer. They didn't comprehend what all was involved in the first appearance of the Messiah. Like some modern Jews, they overlooked the truth of Genesis 3:15 and Isaiah 53. With incidents like the one in our text, the ragamuffin band began to know Jesus better.

The disciples were slow to learn. Aren't we often the same? We profess Jesus, but we often know so little about His will, His word, and His ways with men and women. May we be forever committed to knowing Jesus more and more, to growing in His grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:18).