

ENCOURAGEMENT IN TIMES OF CRISIS: QUESTIONS IN THE STORM

Scripture: Mark 4:35-41

35 And the same day, when the even was come, he saith unto them, let us pass over unto the other side. **36** And when they had sent away the multitude, they took him even as he was in the ship. And there were also with him other little ships. **37** And there arose a great storm of wind, and the waves beat into the ship, so that it was now full. **38** And he was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow: and they awake him, and say unto him, Master, carest thou not that we perish? **39** And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. **40** And he said unto them, why are ye so fearful? how is it that ye have no faith? **41** And they feared exceedingly, and said one to another, what manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?

Facing Uncertain Times

Unexpected life events lead us to ask questions, especially when we encounter a storm. The storms, difficulties, and uncertain times we face in life move us to questions. In this passage from Mark's Gospel, we learn a great deal by paying close attention to the questions asked during the storm.

Personal Reflections: Take a moment to consider the questions and concerns troubling you today. Obviously, we have all experienced questions and concerns raised by the recent outbreak of COVID-19. Are you struggling in other areas? If so, jot those areas down before you continue.

Mark 4 begins with a series of parables Jesus told the crowds—parables He later explained privately to his disciples. The crowd was so large that Jesus used a boat as his “pulpit.” Presumably, the boat was anchored a short distance from shore, so the natural amplification of the water could help people hear the teaching of Jesus. By the end of Mark 4, the boat was no longer stationary but moving. The disciples, at Jesus' request, had taken Him with them in the boat. And, according to Mark, other boats were accompanying Him.

Some years back, an archaeological discovery revealed a boat likely similar to the one Jesus and the disciples used. Roughly 25 feet long and 7 feet wide, this good-sized vessel could hold up to 15 men. Because the Sea of Galilee is situated some 700 feet below sea level and between mountains, it is subject to fierce and sudden storms. In these verses, the disciples found themselves in the middle of one of those storms.

The situation was both dire and desperate: waves pounded the ship and washed over the sides. We can imagine the disciples desperately bailing water, a vain attempt because more water was rushing into the boat. In the middle of their panicked frenzy, they turned to Jesus, who was fast asleep on a cushion in the rear of the boat. Asleep? How could He be asleep? Their discovery led to the first question in the storm, a question asked by the disciples:

A question about indifference and inaction: “Do you not care that we are perishing?”

Jesus was asleep, sound asleep. Perhaps you have faked sleep when playing with your children or grandchildren. Maybe you actually were listening to their conversation or had an eye open slightly to watch what they were doing. This was not true of Jesus. He was asleep. After a long, exhausting day of ministry, and because He was fully human, he needed rest. What seemed extraordinary to the disciples was the fact He was sleeping through the storm.

Have you ever felt this way? Have you ever experienced one of life's storms—or even the storm the world is facing right now—and it seems as though Jesus is sleeping?

You cannot hear His voice or feel action being taken by Him on your behalf. You are frantically “bailing water” out of the boat of your life, and it feels like you are doing it alone, and maybe even sinking. Have you ever wondered if He doesn’t care?

The key word in the paragraph above is the word feel. It feels like He doesn’t care. I’ll be the first to admit: in the middle of life’s storms, it is not always easy to ignore feelings. But, if we rely only on our feelings, we may sometimes conclude that Jesus doesn’t care. Living by feelings leads to living in fear. But living by faith is different. Faith takes God at His Word. Faith embraces the promise, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6). Faith remembers Jesus is with you in the boat during the storm, so all is well.

Personal Reflections: Are you responding to the storms in your life with feelings or faith? From COVID-19 to personal relationships and financial problems, are you trusting God with your life? Or, are you dealing with panic and worry? If your fear has overcome your faith, take a moment to ask God to give you faith for living.

A question of fear: “Why are you so afraid?”

Jesus responded with simple actions and words. He roused from His peaceful slumber, addressed the elements of nature, and they obeyed. He spoke with authority to the wind and the waves: “Peace! Be still.” More literally: “Be muzzled.”

Some of you are fishermen. You know how long it takes the churning whitecaps of a storm to return to a calm. Maybe you have been to a wave pool with your children. You know that once the wave generator stops, the water doesn’t instantly return to calm. At the simple command of Jesus, however, both the wind and the waves obeyed Him, and there was immediate calm. This led Jesus to ask His disciples a question. His question was a gentle and loving rebuke. First, he rebuked the wind and waves, but now He offered a rebuke to his disciples: “Why are you so afraid?”

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, around 8.7% of American adults suffer from one or more phobias. That’s around 19.2 million adults. A phobia is a fear that reaches an irrational or uncontrollable level. It’s the type of fear with the potential to influence decisions. For example: people consistently rank public speaking as one of their greatest fears. A person with a phobia of speaking in public may put off speech class in college for years or choose to receive a bad grade to avoid speaking. We live in an age where all sorts of things cause fear: terrorism, the economy, identity theft, political and social division—and on and on. Some common fears always top the lists of phobias: public speaking, heights, spiders, snakes, darkness, death, and others. Obviously, the recent outbreak of COVID-19 has created a global panic.

Personal Reflections: Rank your top ten fears. What fears would make the list? What would be your greatest fear? Do any of these fears keep you from living out your faith?

A Question of faith: “Have you still no faith?”

Jesus followed His question about fear with a question about faith. His question implied that the disciples should have had faith to meet this situation. After all, they had seen Jesus heal disease, deliver from demon possession, and cleanse and heal a leper with a touch and a word. At this point in Jesus’ ministry, the disciples had spent enough time with Jesus to grow past the point of fear to live in faith.

But let’s not be too harsh on them. After all, we are not much different. Sometimes, we criticize those who witnessed firsthand miracles but were so quick to forget what God had done. We look at these disciples and say, “How could you be afraid with Jesus in the boat?” And yet, we are prone to the same failure of faith as these men. They may have witnessed the miracles of Jesus in real time, but we know how the book ends. We understand that in spite of the difficulties of living in a sin-cursed world, ultimately God holds our lives in His hand.

I recently saw a young man wearing a tee-shirt with a simple graphic: the underlined word faith with the word fear beneath it. Unfortunately, we sometimes “reverse the shirt” and allow fear to overcome our faith.

Personal Reflections: Think of one area in your life where fear tends to overrule faith. Take a moment to pray and ask God's help in overcoming that area of fear in your life. Do you have a friend or loved one who has been paralyzed by fear or worry? Take a moment to pray for that individual, asking God to provide strength and perspective.

A question of identity: "Who is this, that the wind and seas obey Him?"

In a moment, the fear shifts from the storm to the Person inside the boat. The disciples were afraid of the storm, but after seeing firsthand the power and authority of God demonstrated in the calming of the storm, they were filled with awe and wonder—the type of awe and fear people throughout Scripture displayed when they encountered the presence of God. Their awe moved them to ask among themselves, "Who is this, that even the winds and waves obey Him?"

It is not pleasant to find yourself in the middle of a storm in life. But the storm can be a blessing if it helps you see more clearly who Jesus is compared to who you are. If the storm helps you remember:

The storm is strong. Jesus is stronger.

Dr. Robert E. Picirilli once noted three uses of the word great in this account: the great storm, followed by a great calm, which produced great awe in the disciples. The greatness of the storm was no match for the greatness of the calm made possible by the greatness of the Savior. His simple command brought nature to its knees. No other exertion was needed. His authority and power extend over all things. One word calmed the storm.

The storm is temporary. Jesus is eternal.

Regardless of the storms—disease, defeat, danger, even death—Jesus will still be there when the storm is over. The storms of this life are only temporary, but He is eternal.

Questions in the Storm

Have you felt guilty about asking questions during the storm? Let me encourage you: questions are okay, as long as we are asking the right person. We find a wonderful parallel passage in Psalm 107:23-32, which speaks of God's deliverance for people facing all types of situations:

23 They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; **24** These see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep. **25** For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof. **26** They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble. **27** They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit's end. **28** Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and he bringeth them out of their distresses. **29** He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. **30** Then are they glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them unto their desired haven. **31** Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men! **32** Let them exalt him also in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the elders.

When you come out on the other side of the storm, praise Jesus for who He is and what He has done for you. We praise the One who took upon Himself the wrath of God for our sins and emerged victorious from the grave, who now lives forevermore as the Prince of Peace to all who trust in Him.

The Psalm says He brought them to their desired haven. That is all the disciples really needed to know as they stepped into the boat on the Sea of Galilee. As long as Jesus was in the boat with them, they had no need to fear but could face the storm with faith. In troubling times, this is a good reminder for us:

Go to Him with your question: "Don't you care that I am perishing?"

Accept His gentle rebuke: "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

Respond with awe inspired worship: "Who is this, that even the winds and waves obey him?"