

**connect** 360

**BIBLE STUDY GUIDE**

# The reMARKable Journey Continues

## THE GOSPEL OF URGENCY

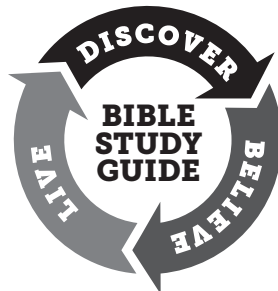
A STUDY OF MARK 4–7

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*The reMARKable Journey Continues: The Gospel of Urgency*  
*Connect 360 Bible Study Guide*

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# How to Make the Best Use of This Issue

Whether you're the teacher or a student—

1. Start early in the week before your class meets.
2. Overview the study. Review the table of contents and read the study introduction. Try to see how each lesson relates to the overall study.
3. Use your Bible to read and consider prayerfully the Scripture passages for the lesson. (You'll see that each writer has chosen a favorite translation for the lessons in this issue. You're free to use the Bible translation you prefer and compare it with the translation chosen for that unit, of course.)
4. After reading all the Scripture passages in your Bible, then read the writer's comments. The comments are intended to be an aid to your study of the Bible.
5. Read the small articles—"sidebars"—in each lesson. They are intended to provide additional, enrichment information and inspiration and to encourage thought and application.
6. Try to answer for yourself the questions included in each lesson. They're intended to encourage further thought and application, and they can also be used in the class session itself.

If you're the teacher—

Do all the things just mentioned, of course. As you begin the study with your class, be sure to find a way to help your class know the date on which each lesson will be studied. Here are some suggestions to guide your lesson preparation:

- A. In the first session of the study, briefly overview the study by identifying for your class the date on which each lesson will be studied. Lead your class to write the date in the table of contents on pages 12–13 and on the first page of each lesson.
- Make and post a chart that indicates the date each lesson will be studied.
  - If all your class has e-mail, send them an e-mail with the dates the lessons will be studied.
  - Provide a bookmark with the lesson dates. You may want to include information about your church and then use the bookmark as an outreach tool, too. A model for a bookmark can be downloaded from [www.gc2press.org](http://www.gc2press.org) under the “Teacher Helps” menu.
  - Develop a sticker with the lesson dates and place it on the table of contents or on the back cover.
- B. Get a copy of the *Teaching Guide*, a companion piece to this *Study Guide*. The *Teaching Guide* contains additional Bible comments plus two teaching plans. The teaching plans in the *Teaching Guide* are intended to provide practical, easy-to-use teaching suggestions that will work in your class.

- C. After you've studied the Bible passage, the lesson comments, and other material, use the teaching suggestions in the *Teaching Guide* to help you develop your plan for leading your class in studying each lesson.
- D. Premium Commentary is now available for \$30 at [www.gc2press.org](http://www.gc2press.org). This in-depth commentary is a great resource for teachers.
- E. Teaching resource items for use as handouts are available for \$20 at [www.gc2press.org](http://www.gc2press.org). under the "Teacher Helps" tab.
- F. Enjoy leading your class in discovering the meaning of the Scripture passages and in applying these passages to their lives.
- G. You can receive the lesson preview each week by signing up for the *Baptist Standard* weekly newsletter at no cost. Sign up here: ([www.baptiststandard.com/subscription/email](http://www.baptiststandard.com/subscription/email)).

## Writers for this *Study Guide*

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# Introducing

## The reMARKable Journey Continues *The Gospel of Urgency*

A STUDY OF MARK 4–7

### **Background on the Gospel of Mark**

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The gospel of Mark has been called the “action” gospel because of its focus on Jesus’ urgency and action. The word “immediately” appears forty-one times in Mark—more than any other gospel and more than twice as many times as the word appears in the rest of the New Testament. The shortest of the four gospels, Mark revealed Jesus as the authoritative Son of God who inaugurated the kingdom of God through His words and actions.

Many scholars also believe Mark was the first of the four gospels to be written. According to church tradition, John Mark was the author of the gospel of Mark (Acts 15:36–40; 2 Timothy 4:11). Though the New Testament records Mark’s connection with Paul, early church history also records his relationship with Peter. Evidence suggests that Mark was Pe-



ter's interpreter and based his gospel on Peter's teaching and preaching.

Mark was likely written between AD 60 and 70 to Christians living in Rome. This small group of Christians were experiencing intense persecution under Emperor Nero. Mark wrote, in part, to encourage these Christians by showing how Jesus ushered in the kingdom of God despite rejection and opposition. The gospel's key themes are the nature of faith and discipleship, the contrast between insiders and outsiders, the inclusion of Gentiles, and Jesus' deliberate journey to the cross.

—Leigh Powers

### **The Gospel of Urgency**

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Do you ever feel anxious living in an increasingly hostile environment?

Do you ever feel angry when you consider what is happening in our culture?

Do you ever feel tension when you see Christianity becoming increasingly marginalized in our secular society?

Something far worse was happening to first century Christians. After Rome suffered a huge fire that was likely set by its very own emperor Nero, Christians were blamed for starting

the fire. Persecution was unleashed and things became very precarious for believers. Many eyewitnesses of the incredible ministry of Jesus were being executed, so writing down what Jesus said and did became very important.

It was in this setting that Mark wrote what is known as the shortest gospel. Mark was encouraging a small group of people to continue to live on mission just as Jesus did, no matter how difficult it became. They needed to be reminded that even though times were bad, God would still work through their witness.

Just like a really good action movie, Mark's gospel is action packed from start to finish. This is ***The Gospel of Urgency***.

### **Suggested Resources for the Study of Mark<sup>1</sup>**

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## NOTE

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<sup>1</sup> Listing a book does not imply full agreement by the writer or GC2 Press with all its comments.

# The reMARKable Journey Continues

## *The Gospel of Urgency*

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# lesson 1

# Seeds of Faith

## MAIN IDEA

The spiritual impact of the Word is not based on the content of the message; it depends on how the Word is heard and received.

## QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Am I hungry for God's Word?

## STUDY AIM

To understand that the only way to know for certain if you are a fruitful hearer of the Word is if you are planting God's Word in others

## QUICK READ

The seed is the Word of God. It gets planted everywhere, but only some of the seeds grow to the point of actually producing a harvest. The four soil types represent different levels of receptivity to God's Word.

## Introduction

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If you grow your own plants in your own garden, today's parable will resonate with you. It is one of Jesus' most famous parables. Some call it "The Parable of the Sower." Others call it "The Parable of the Seeds," while most people today call it "The Parable of the Soils." We will look at how the sower, the seed, and the soils are all key participants in this parable.

### Mark 4:1–20

<sup>1</sup> Again He began to teach by the sea. And such a very large crowd gathered to Him that He got into a boat on the sea and sat down; and the whole crowd was by the sea on the land. <sup>2</sup> And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, <sup>3</sup> "Listen to *this!* Behold, the sower went out to sow; <sup>4</sup> as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up. <sup>5</sup> Other seed fell on the rocky *ground* where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup> And when the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. <sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. <sup>8</sup> Other seeds fell into the good soil, and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundred *times as much.*" <sup>9</sup> And He was saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

<sup>10</sup> As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve *disciples*, began asking Him *about* the parables. <sup>11</sup> And He was saying to them, "To you has been given the mystery

of the kingdom of God, but for those who are outside, everything comes in parables, <sup>12</sup> so that while seeing they may see, and not perceive, and while hearing, they may hear, and not understand, otherwise they might return and it would be forgiven them."

<sup>13</sup> And He \*said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables? <sup>14</sup> The sower sows the word. <sup>15</sup> These are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them. <sup>16</sup> And in a similar way these are the ones sown *with seed* on the rocky *places*, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; <sup>17</sup> and yet they have no *firm* root in themselves, but are *only* temporary; then, when affliction or persecution occurs because of the word, immediately they fall away. <sup>18</sup> And others are the ones sown *with seed* among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, <sup>19</sup> but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things enter and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. <sup>20</sup> And those are the ones sown *with seed* on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept *it* and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundred *times as much*."

## **The Sower (4:1–20)**

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In this parable, Jesus' popularity was growing, and crowds were following Him. In Mark 4, He began again to teach the multitude down by the sea. Such a large crowd gathered, that He got into a boat, pushed out a little into the water, and began to speak.



This provided two advantages: First, He could be seen and heard by more people, since their view was not blocked. Secondly, His voice would bounce off the water, magnifying the sound to be heard by the larger crowd, all along the beach.

## **What Is a Parable, and What Is it Designed to Do?**

A parable is a story from everyday life that illustrates or clarifies one major spiritual truth. George Buttrick describes a parable as Jesus telling the multitude a story about themselves. Or as Klyne R. Snodgrass put it in the title of his book, parables are *Stories with Intent*.

He began (4:3) with the words: “Listen!” and “Behold!” He concluded the teaching saying: “If any man has ears to hear, let him hear!” So from the start to the end, the main theme is “Listen to what Jesus says.” If you have ears, use them! Listen as though your life depends on it, for your eternal destiny does.

The next command is to behold the sower. Perhaps there was a person sowing seed within visual range of the crowd; in any case, Jesus wanted them to think of the familiar activity as they listened to the truth. The sower distributed seed into the field, anticipating a harvest. In first century Palestine, sowing was done either by the sower carrying a bag of seed at his side and throwing the seed out with a sweeping movement, scattering seeds on all types of soil in the proximity. Some sowers would mount a bag of seed on the back of a donkey, cut holes in the bag and walk the donkey around the land, sowing seed as it fell from the bag.

Human agency is required to get the seed out of the grain bag and distribute it to places it can germinate and grow. In the original setting, Jesus is the Sower. He has come to spread the Word of God's kingdom and reality throughout the land. Historically, every Christian is to be a sower who spreads the Word of God and Gospel message to others. The sower must go out among the fields, among the various types of soil, and disperse the seed to be implanted in the lives of other people. The last thing Jesus said to His disciples before ascending into Heaven, was to go into all the world as witnesses to the reality of Jesus, making disciples of all people, teaching them all the things Jesus taught. As you go, and sow, I will be with you forever (Matthew 28:19–20).

Many Christians think they can't do this, but we must do this. How can people hear, if we don't tell them? God did not give us a Bible full of seeds to carry around in a closed bag. Seeds are for planting. Some people don't think they know what to say, but witnesses just tell other people about things they have seen or experienced. Don't worry about all the things you don't know; tell them what you do know, what you have experienced with Jesus.

## **The Seed (4:1–20)**

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The seed in this parable is pretty amazing, and miraculous. The sower took the seed, walked through the fields of life, passing out seed wherever he or she went. In the explanation of this parable that Jesus gave to His disciples (see 4:13–20), the seed was the Word (of God). It is the truth Jesus taught us; the truth Jesus showed us.

The seed has life in itself. Jesus did not say we have to make seeds germinate. He said we need to get the seeds out to those who need God's divine life to break forth in their lives. God's Word accomplishes what He sends it to accomplish (Isaiah 55:11). Hebrews says it is alive and powerful (Hebrews 4:12). The task of each of us is to sow seeds, plant God's Word into the lives of others (James 1:22). Put God's Word into practice, do what God teaches us to do, and share what we know whenever we get the chance. We are called to be seed planters. It is God who can make that Word and seed come alive, bringing forth life and vitality to the person who now has possession of the seed.

The seed has innate life and power within it. No matter what soil the seed landed upon in this parable, and in Jesus' explanation of the parable, the seed had potential life within it. The seed that fell on the busy path got swept aside, eaten by birds, or stolen by Satan. But in the other three soil scenarios, the seed sprouted. God's Word has life in it and produces life through it.

The only limitation of the seed is not being distributed by Jesus' followers. Salt in a saltshaker makes no impact on food. The salt must get out of the saltshaker and come in contact with what it must salt. When that happens, pizzazz happens, increasing zesty flavor. In the same way, we must get the seed out of the bag, passing it on to others, making an impact in their lives. The seeds may not sprout immediately, but that is not our responsibility. Our responsibility is to plant the seeds in other people's lives.

## **The Soils (4:1–20)**

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The setting of this parable is that there were large groups of people hearing the teachings of Jesus, yet not experiencing a trans-

forming impact. The lingering question for the disciples was “Why?” Why do lots of folks come and hear Jesus, but the number of disciples doesn’t reflect rapid growth? Jesus pointed out that the problem lies in the way people receive, or fail to receive, God’s Word of truth.

### **How Can We Plant Seeds in the Lives of Others?**

We should do it like Jesus did it. Make statements, ask questions, plant ideas and thoughts into their lives. For example, in college I worked on a project maintaining desert plants. As geese flew over the area, I would comment to my co-worker about the amazing way God designed geese to take turns flying at the point of their formation. I went back to my work, but my co-corker started thinking about God’s remarkable and detailed designs in creation. That is an example of daily seed planting.

Four types of soils are set forth in 4:3–9, and 4:13–20. They represent four types of responses to God’s Word of life, four lifestyles that affect the vitality (or lack of vitality) of people’s responses to God’s Word, typifying four levels of attentiveness to God’s Word.

*The first soil* (see 4:4; 4:15) is described as a compacted, traffic-filled, hard pathway. In first century Palestine, people had agricultural allotments or plots of land they could plant and harvest. These fields generally didn’t have fences but were separated by pathways for people to access the fields without crushing the crops. The paths were well traveled, with little vegetation. When

seed fell on this hard pathway, it merely bounced off, was swept towards the edges, or crushed under foot. These paths became fast-food buffets for birds, who could follow along behind the sower and eat the easily accessible seeds. The seeds could not take hold to germinate or grow on such a hard surface.

Jesus compared this to a person upon whom the seed falls but is swept away or snatched up before it germinates. This very closely typifies the response to Jesus in our busy world today. Most people are moving so fast and involved in so many different things, that the seed of God's Word doesn't have a chance to take hold in their lives. God, the Bible, and church are merely swept aside in the rush of our overly filled schedules; schedules that are full of worldly priorities that leave no time for God. When we get too busy to spend time in God's Word, or to share God's Word with others, we are too busy.

*The second soil* (4:5–6; 4:16–17) was what we would call “hard-pan” soil. This is when a little topsoil covers a hard layer that is difficult to penetrate. There was enough topsoil for the seeds to germinate, but then the roots of the new seedlings hit immovable undersoil rocks or hardened layers that prevented the roots from progressing and growing. So there is a quick burst of life, but the seedlings would soon die from drought and shallow roots. This soil typifies people who attend church when it is popular, or fun, but when a deeper commitment to God is required, they wither and shrink. This is a result of shallow commitment and lack of depth in the Word of God, which otherwise could flourish even in spiritual drought. They are Christians who are merely church attenders rather than living disciples. In 4:17 Jesus said this kind of reception of God's Word is quick and temporary, but when it

becomes difficult to stand with Christ in persecution, these people wither and disappear.

*The third soil* (4:7; 4:18–19) had roots or seeds of thorns left over from the previous times. So as the desired plants began to grow, the thorns and weeds sprung up as well, competing for the same water and nutritional resources needed by the desired plants. The weeds choked out the desired plants, destroying the crop. In 4:18–19 the weeds are the worries of the world, and the desires of secular appetites that choke out God’s Word, which then becomes unfruitful.

*The fourth soil* (4:8; 4:20) is the good soil; it is the doer of the Word and not merely a hearer (James 1:19–24). The person represented as this soil, according to 4:8: experienced productive growth, increased, and yielded crops that were thirty, sixty, and a hundred-fold more than the seed planted. In 4:20 this soil/person is fruitful because: they are good soil (with depth and free of weeds), they continue to listen to the Word, and they embrace, accept, and cultivate God’s Word in their life. They do what God instructs them to do, they plant seeds in others, and let God produce a harvest through their life.

## **Implications and Actions**

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Jesus is the ultimate Sower, the Word or truth of God is the seed, and humans are the soil within which God’s seeds of truth are planted and need to grow. The Word of God is alive and active, growing within the believer, and producing God’s fruit and more seeds through us. We need to keep our soil, our lives, in good condition and receptive to what God wants to do in and through

us. We need to be plowed periodically to remain healthy and deep soil. We need to let God regularly weed our lives to remove impediments to growth and become doers as well as hearers of the Word.

We are to daily be sowers, planting the seeds of God's life and God's Word into others. We need to sow lots of seeds, for not all will survive; but the ones that find good soil, will flourish and produce an abundant harvest for God and His kingdom.

## Questions

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1. Which of the four types of soil, or listener, are you today?
2. What kinds of things are weeds that appear in your life, which continue to compete with your growth in the Lord, inhibiting your production of fruit for God? How can you weed them out of your life?
3. What commitment(s) do you want to make with God that will help you daily be good soil, listening to what God is telling you to do?

4. Who needs you to plant some of God's seeds in their life? What area of their life needs God's life and growth the most?
  
5. Develop a strategy to plant seeds in \_\_\_\_\_'s life this week. What seeds would get them thinking about how to deal with an issue in their life? What Bible verse would meet their need?

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> George A. Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1985), 43.
- <sup>2</sup> Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008).

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## Lesson 1: Seeds of Faith

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# lesson 2

# The Truth About Light

## MAIN IDEA

To understand that God has given everyone a conscience that gives them an innate sense of right and wrong.

## QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Have I noticed the testimony of creation?

## STUDY AIM

To understand that those who reject God's light experience spiritual darkness

## QUICK READ

Some people may stand before God and claim they should be excused from judgment because they never had a Bible or never heard the Gospel. But God has given them two strong witnesses: creation and conscience. God's light is not hidden. It is being revealed to everyone.

## Introduction

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Can you think of a time in your life when you needed God’s leadership about a particular difficulty, but you couldn’t figure out what He was instructing you to do? I am sure we’ve all had such experiences when we felt overwhelmed and wanted clear input from God. But sometimes the message we get from God is not the one we had desired.

This is most likely what was happening in today’s passage. The disciples had just witnessed Jesus speaking to huge crowds of people, yet Jesus had chosen to speak to the multitudes in parables, stories that shed light on the subject, but required spiritual insight and thought to understand it at a deeper level. It is likely the disciples asked Jesus why He spoke in parables (see 4:10–12) instead of compact truths ready to assimilate. So Jesus responded by giving them another parable in 4:21–25.

After Jesus’ baptism in Mark 1:9–13, in 1:14 we read: “Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God.” For centuries, the Jews had been waiting for the Messiah, whom they thought would establish the kingdom of God on Earth, centered in Jerusalem. They expected instant changes when the Messiah came, including the expulsion of the occupying Roman Empire. But God had different plans.

### **Mark 4:21–25, 33–34**

<sup>21</sup> And He was saying to them, “A lamp is not brought to be put under a basket, or under a bed, is it? Is it not *brought* to be put on the lampstand? <sup>22</sup> For nothing is hidden, except to

be revealed; nor has *anything* been secret, but that it would come to light. <sup>23</sup>If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." <sup>24</sup>And He was saying to them, "Take care what you listen to. By your standard of measure it will be measured to you; and *more* will be given you besides. <sup>25</sup>For whoever has, to him *more* will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him."

<sup>33</sup>And with many such parables He was speaking the word to them, so far as they were able to understand it; <sup>34</sup>and He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples.

## **Some Possible Reasons Jesus Spoke in Parables**

- Jesus was not just evangelizing the multitudes, nor merely having healing services. Jesus was training the disciples to take leadership after He was crucified. They needed time to learn from Him and grow.
- The crowds, out of their messianic zeal, could have artificially sped up the coronation of Jesus as the Messiah, running it on man's timetable instead of God's. The crowds needed to learn that the kingdom God was establishing was not man-centered but God-centered; not a geopolitical kingdom but an eternal spiritual kingdom.
- Sometimes it's easier to remember a story than a teaching; a picture is worth a thousand words. The more one tried to find all the meaning in it, they would be immersed more and more in God's method of changing their lives.
- The teaching of the parable would come back into their mind, every time they encountered a sower, or a lamp.

So Jesus came preaching and teaching the gospel of God. The Old Covenant needed to be fulfilled in Jesus and replaced by the New Covenant. The new people of God includes all those who believe Jesus, from all cultures and languages, not just from Israel. The kingdom Jesus was talking about is eternal, with no end.

## **The Lamp Comes to Shine and Illuminate (4:21–23)**

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In this parable, which inspired the children’s song “This Little Light of Mine,” Jesus answered the question: “Why do you teach in parables?” Jesus used a traditional Rabbi’s skill in asking the question in a way to elicit a negative response. So Jesus basically asked: You don’t light a lamp in a dark room so you can hide the light from shining, do you? The answer is, “Of course not!” By forcefully leading the listeners to dismiss the alternate possibility, Jesus then led them to the purpose of lighting a lamp.

Think of a time when the power went off, and you entered an unfamiliar, totally dark room. Your first task was to locate a source of light, be it matches, a candle, or even your cell phone’s flashlight. You need light so you find it, so you can function in the darkness.

So do you find the source of light, then block it so you can’t see? No. Why not? Because you need light. When you’re in the dark you don’t purposely extinguish the light to sit in darkness again.

There is some question as to why the Greek wording of the Mark 4:21 text says, “The lamp comes into the room.” Inanimate lamps do not walk around. Lamps don’t come in; they are brought

in. Lamp here has a definite article, which usually means “the definitive lamp, the best or qualitatively superior lamp.” This leads some interpreters to say that the lamp is Jesus in this verse. Of course, this is true, for Jesus said of Himself in John 8:12: “I am the Light of the world; the one who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.” But it is also true in John 8:12 and other passages that state we as His disciples are to be God’s light shining in the darkness (Matthew 5:14), a city on a hill that gives light to the world.

However, in the immediate context Jesus is explaining why He uses parables to communicate spiritual truth. So “light a lamp” in this verse probably refers to His parables as being a lamp to reveal the truth of God and His ways. God is alive in the other words in the Bible, too. The last parable spoke of the life being in the seeds sown. Parables therefore are living truth that interacts with serious listeners, enlightening our minds, lighting the path, revealing Jesus and giving us perspective on living for God.

We live in a world full of spiritual darkness, yet even secular people still have some vestige of the image of God within them, and therefore know that there is right and wrong in this world (see Romans 1:19–21). Sometimes people purposely try to snuff out God’s light, or attack the truth to make it seem ridiculous, yet deep down they know there is a God. You don’t fight against something you truly believe doesn’t exist.

We are to bring the light of Jesus into contact with those in darkness, so they can realize there is an alternative, better life to be experienced. Jesus came to shine God’s light all around us (John 8:12) and penetrate the darkened souls that stumble

around in the dark. God came to us when we were in the dark; now we are to take Jesus to those still in the dark.

If you or anyone has ears, let him hear and take appropriate action. In Hebrew thought, hearing leads to doing. Words are prime movers; once spoken a response is initiated. God commanded: “Let there be light” ... and light came into being. True in Jesus’ time, too. Jesus spoke, and it happened. Jesus is saying: I have spoken to you, you have heard, take action on what was said.

### **The Mystery/Secret of the Kingdom of God**

In Mark 4:11, Jesus said the secret/mystery of the kingdom had been given to believers. In English, a mystery/secret is something that still requires solving. Here, and in Paul’s writings, “mystery” means: Something that was a mystery or secret, but now has been revealed to Christians by Jesus.

### **Hearing and Obeying God ... an Ongoing Investment (4:24–25)**

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*Be careful what you listen to.* Most of us today are flooded with waves of information. But we must be careful about this glut of information and input. The things you saturate your mind with each day become a part of your mind and your thoughts. They impact your emotions and thereby impact most of your relationships. Sometimes what we put into our minds while “relaxing” comes flooding out when we are stressed. On the other hand, many Christians who commute use that time to listen to the Bi-

ble or Christian music. Choose what you put into you mind. Some things will remain there forever.

*By your standard of measure invested, so will be the standard of returns you receive.* This might be a redirect back to the parable of the soils. The quality of your listening will impact the quality of your harvest. That parable emphasized our receptivity to God's Word. If we are too busy to allow God's Word to come into our lives, it won't. If we resist what God is trying to grow in our life, the seed we receive is wasted. If we commit ourselves to being receptive to what God is saying to us, we will experience rich returns, and more than we ever dreamed possible.

I recently read of a story where two friends, one a baker and the other a butcher, decided to exchange goods with each other. For every pound of meat the butcher provided the baker, he would get equal pounds of flour in return. This worked fine for a while. Then the butcher got angry, because he measured the flour received over several weeks and the portions of flour consistently weighed less than a pound. The butcher accused the baker of cheating him, demanding to see the baker's scales. The baker replied, "Oh, I never use weights on the flour for you. I always put the pound of meat you give me on the scale and give you an equal measure of flour." The butcher had been caught. The evidence showed that the butcher had been cheating all along, giving the baker considerably less than a pound of meat. With the measure you give, the same you will receive.

If you listen to or read a lot of God's Word each day, each day you will receive back an equitable amount ... and even more. You can't out-give God. The principle is not a financial investment in this case. It is investing your time, paying attention to what God



is saying, giving your full attention to God when He is talking with you.

Listening is a skill that gets better with use. In the past, young students were routinely given dictation; the students had to write down perfectly what the teacher dictated. With young children it started out simple, then got progressively more complex as they grew with time. It is a difficult exercise, but the students learn how to hear, remember, and take notes. Thus, the student's ability to learn, listen, and recall important details is remarkably improved. Jesus taught that the better you get at listening and the more you learn through it, your capability to hear and go deeper into meanings expands.

God also had a warning for those people who reject Jesus instead of listening to God. Rather than their abilities and skills expanding, they lose what little receptivity that had at the start. When God tells them to do something and they don't even bother to listen, let alone implement what God tells them to do, they will actually lose what they had. They think they are staying even, or don't need to hear what God has to share with them, but they are really just cheating themselves.

## **Implications and Actions**

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The more senses we use in learning from Jesus, the more we will gather at each opportunity. The more we learn and gather, the more our skill sets grow. Then the more useful we become in God's kingdom, the more our quality of life will be enriched.

Jesus told parables so people who know little about God, could catch the main meaning of the parable and learn something

about Him, Jesus, His kingdom, and about themselves. For those of us who know Jesus, studying the parables will enrich our understanding of the ways of God, and help us see God at work in our lives, and thereby the more we will be able to convey light to those who know little about Jesus.

Jesus brings light to us as we pause to reflect upon His teachings. The more we saturate our lives with God's Word, the more we will see and learn, plus we get bountiful blessings from God.

We need to train ourselves to listen, by listening to sermons, listening to the Bible being read, and listening to what people are really asking or saying to us. Be careful what you listen to because it becomes some of the building blocks of your mind and values.

An old saying is that God gave us two ears and one mouth, so we will listen twice as much as we speak. Easier said than done. But the more you invest in listening to God, and the more your understanding capability will grow. The more you know about Jesus and the kingdom, the more connections and depth you experience.

## Questions

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1. Examine the content of the sidebar, "Some Possible Reasons Jesus Spoke in Parables." Below are three areas that Jesus spent a lot of ministry time. Rate the following three priorities in your life by placing a 1 as what you do most, a 2 by what gets your second emphasis, and a 3 by what gets your least emphasis:
  - Evangelism and sharing with others how they can become more like Jesus.

- Healing or ministering to the physical, social, relational, or spiritual wounds of others.
- Spending time sharing your spiritual insights, experiences, and skills with others to help them to grow and be equipped to be a servant leader, who then chooses to invest their lives into others.

2. In 4:21–23, who or what is the lamp in your view? Do you think Jesus is the lamp, the disciples are to be the lamp, or that the parables Jesus told are the lamp? Or do you believe all three are the lamp? Write down your choice(s) below.

Explain why you believe each of your choices is the lamp, and also how each (Jesus, believers, or parables) are the lamp. In what way do the ones you selected, reveal life, light, or illumination and shine God's light for people in your town or neighborhood?

3. List four methods or tools that you use to clearly hear what God is saying to you in your daily life.

4. List four ways you could daily improve your listening skills to help you become a better hearer.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>J. A. Brooks, *Mark* (Vol. 23) (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), 82.

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# lesson 3



# The Mysterious and Mighty Little Mustard Seed

## MAIN IDEA

God delights to bring great things out of humble beginnings.

## QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What is the kingdom of God?

## STUDY AIM

To understand that like a mustard seed, there should be a growing awareness of righteousness, peace, and joy in our lives

## QUICK READ

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that is planted.

## Introduction

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What is the kingdom of God? There was much confusion about this subject at the time of Christ, and still is today. Did the kingdom of God arrive with Jesus? Are Christians participating in the kingdom of God right now? Or will it come only after Jesus' second coming? Jesus told parables to help us understand what the kingdom of God is. Let's explore two of these.

### Mark 4:26–32

<sup>26</sup> And He was saying, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; <sup>27</sup> and he goes to bed at night and gets up daily, and the seed sprouts and grows—how, he himself does not know. <sup>28</sup> The soil produces crops by itself; first the stalk, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. <sup>29</sup> Now when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

<sup>30</sup> And He was saying, "How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? <sup>31</sup> *It is* like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is the smallest of all the seeds that are upon the soil, <sup>32</sup> yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants, and forms large branches, with the result that THE BIRDS OF THE SKY can NEST UNDER its shade."

## **The Kingdom of God Is Like Seed Sown Upon the Soil (4:26–29)**

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To the Jews of Jesus' time, the kingdom meant God's Messiah would reign in a geopolitical kingdom centered in Israel. Jesus did come as God's anointed Messiah to establish the kingdom of God, but He rejected the limitations of a geopolitical kingdom.

Jesus spent most of His time with the disciples redefining what the kingdom of God really is. He came to reconnect fallen humans with God their Creator, and to re-establish a people who would commit themselves to daily do God's will on Earth, as it is done in Heaven. The kingdom is comprised of people who daily do the King's will, people from every ethnic group, and every nation in the world (Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 10:34–35). The kingdom's manifestation began with the arrival of Jesus and today grows daily as new believers enter it.

In Mark 4:26, we read a simile that Jesus used to describe what the kingdom of God is like. He said that the kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil, and entrusts the germination, growth, and harvest to God. The man sows the seed, probably barley or wheat, then goes back to his other routines, trusting that the seed will do what it was meant to do. The sower sowed the seeds, entrusted them to God, waited for a sign of life, and watched them grow.

- The kingdom of God is a new way of life, a life that begins when a person allows God's life to enter into them, transforming their life and relationships.

For many years our churches have implemented many programs and methods for church growth. The core idea was that

church growth depended upon well-organized human plans, hard work, advertising, programing, music, etc. Indeed, the ministry of the church is done by committed believers serving God in many ways, and organization is needed to be effective.

## **What Is the Kingdom of God?**

- Jesus proclaimed that in Him, the kingdom of God had arrived (Mark:1:15; 2:19; 10:14–15, 23–24).
- Jesus equated receiving eternal life with entering the kingdom (Mark 10:17–30). The disciples, in relating to Jesus, experienced the kingdom of God.
- Jesus is the kingdom-producing Seed, for He is the King of the kingdom (Galatians 3:22–29; Mark 4:26–32; John 12:20–26). Jesus and Paul taught that God’s kingdom is no longer Israel-centered, but Christ-centered; no longer Abraham’s seeds-centered, but Abraham’s Seed-centered, i.e. singular seed, Jesus-centered (see Galatians 3:16, 26–29).
- The kingdom of God is entered by faith in Jesus. The kingdom is Jesus the King coming to live and reign everyday as LORD in the lives of believers, regardless of their location or ethnicity (see Galatians 3:26–29; Ephesians 2:4–10, 14–22; Acts 10:34–35).
- The kingdom of God manifests itself through believers who seek to obediently do God’s will on earth (Matthew 6:10).

But ministry is more than a program. Germinating the life-giving seed of the kingdom is always the work of God. How is God’s



Spirit working through your church? How does God want you to serve and sow seed?

Several years ago, I ran across an interesting book, *The Sailboat Church*, written by a Presbyterian Elder from Atlanta. One evening I was reading that book as I waited to pray the invocation for the County Board of Supervisors, when suddenly the man next to me started chuckling, and said: “That’s a great statement, and it’s so true!” I asked, “What statement is that?” He said, “I laughed at what is written on the back of the book which says that Rowboat churches depend mostly on human effort, and when the church starts floundering, their solution is to row harder.” The next statement also caught his eye: “On the other hand, Sailboat churches lay aside oars, hoist their sails, and rely on the Holy Spirit to direct and empower them.”

So many churches have relied on being program-driven (rowing) churches; but when the church begins to decline, their “go-to” solution is to just row harder. The church I currently pastor had tried many old programs and new methods that should have worked, but none brought new people into our congregation, nor into our beautiful building.

As our church asked God to reveal to us what we needed to do to reach people, the most frequent answer from God was: “We have to start ministering outside the building.” Then Covid hit. So we took God’s advice! We moved our worship services outdoors, doing a Drive-In Church in the park across from the church. We used the gazebo for the pulpit and music platform, worshipers parked their cars in semi-circles around it, filling the field. The church began to grow, attracting people from the community, and a spirit of joy filled us all in the midst of the pandemic!

Baptisms, attendance, and weekly offerings grew significantly, and we experienced many little miracles. The church is still growing and doing outdoor drive-in services 6 months of the year. God isn't through using churches to reach people; but we must learn how to minister to the people who won't initially come into our buildings.

We don't always see the processes of how a plant grows, nor how the kingdom of God grows. This is what Jesus was teaching in this parable. The disciples probably wondered why Jesus didn't spend more time networking in the synagogue, or at big events. Perhaps they wondered when He was going to become the conquering Messiah the Jews were expecting.

Instead, Jesus spent three years mentoring and teaching His disciples, all the while redefining the kingdom. God is working in the lives of people, and through the lives of people, even when we do not see direct evidence. The kingdom is not a sudden coronation or military mobilization event. It is God at work, quietly, continually, growing the kingdom from small beginnings to become the worldwide people of God.

The seed is sown (4:26–27). The sower sows seed, then while he goes about his business, suddenly the seeds germinate. Soon green blades shoot up above the soil, the plant develops, and eventually produces new seeds for a new crop.

The seed automatically germinates and step by step does what it is supposed to do (4:28). We like to emphasize the “how?” The farmer didn't know “how,” and couldn't explain it. When God is at work, we can't explain “how” either. How does the seed germinate? How does it grow? The farmer didn't worry about whether the seeds knew how to grow. We worry about everything! Our

motto is: “We’ve got to do something!” We do this in our personal lives, and in church work. We have trouble letting God do His work in His own time, to accomplish His designed purposes.

In verse 28, the phrase “by itself” is the Greek word *automate* from which we get our word “automatically.” God designed the process. He put into the seed all the growth instructions, and produced the interactions of soil, warmth, and sunlight, to produce seed germination and a harvest (4:29).

Step by step, kingdom growth occurs. What would happen in our life if we filled our life with God’s Seed (be it the Word of God, or Jesus Himself)? Can God change you? Can God produce life in a church whose rowers are exhausted? Will we trust Him, and let Him?

- The kingdom of God grows as more and more seeds are sown, and God works in each new life to bring it to its full potential.

Humans are not the ones who give life to a seed. God does that. God begins it, grows it, and works His purposes throughout the whole process.

The sower waited for God to do His work, trusting Him for the whole process from seed to maturity. We can trust God with this, too! It is God who fulfills His designed purposes. *Seed sown* is a natural activity that we do, but the *seed grown* is supernatural process done invisibly under the supervision and provisions of God.

## **Small Beginnings Often Produce Huge Outcomes! (4:30–32)**

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The kingdom starts small but becomes huge. We live in a culture that celebrates “bigness.” We assume that popularity and large crowds equates with quality and greatness of product. Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn’t. In God’s kingdom, you need to grow where God has planted you, serving faithfully. The living God working through you and your church is what matters in kingdom terms.

In this parable, Jesus focused on giving a picture of the kingdom of God. The mustard seed is really small. William Lane commented that here the kingdom is not likened to a mustard seed, but rather likened to what happens to the mustard seed, to what comes out of it. The kingdom of God was beginning small, but one day (as in the 20th and 21st centuries) it would encompass the world.

### **Mustard Seed**

The mustard seed and plant/tree were common in Israel. While technically an herb, it has been known to grow as large as a tree, with some people reporting seeing mustard herbs or trees with three-inch trunks and six to twelve feet in height (as per Vincent in Hobbs). Birds perch in the shade in them, eating their seeds.

So this parable is an encouraging message that it is not how small you are now that matters; it’s the incredibly huge things God can make from your small beginnings. Jesus is contrasting

small, seemingly unimpressive beginnings, with surprising huge, unforeseen outcomes.

Don't get discouraged over your current situation; you have no idea what a big impact your life, or your church's life, might make on hundreds, or thousands, of people in eternity. With Jesus, small beginnings do not limit huge outcomes. Faithfulness in the seemingly insignificant small things, might be growing a forest of spiritual redwoods in eternity.

Jesus' kingdom began as one person, as Jesus alone. Then Jesus called the twelve disciples and invested His life and teachings into them. After His crucifixion there were only 120 believers (Acts 1:15), perhaps comparable to your church's size. On the day of Pentecost 3,000 more were baptized and added to the church, people from many nations and languages (Acts 2:41, 47). And the Lord was daily adding more to their number. Soon Christianity conquered the Roman Empire, not through violence, but through God's many people serving God in small scenarios, embodying God's love and redemption.

In 2020 the estimated number of Christians in the world was 2.38 billion (see Pew Research). That doesn't include the countless millions of Christians over the last 2000 years. The kingdom's growth from 120 to billions of people in the kingdom of God today, all started from Jesus. From Jesus, one seemingly insignificant seed that was despised and crushed by the world; Jesus, Whom God raised from the dead, and Who is now the King of kings and Lord of lords. This Jesus is now worshiped in nearly every country of the world.

In using the image of the kingdom of God being like a mustard seed that becomes the largest of plants in the garden, Jesus

was perhaps using a simile that would take the Jews' minds to a similar comparison, recorded in Ezekiel 17:22–24. There God prophesied a restored people of God from a small twig of Israel and it growing to be a huge tree (Ezekiel 17:24) in which birds of every kind will nest, thus pointing to Jesus the long-awaited Messiah. The kingdom Jesus began, will continue to grow until Christ's return. It is and will be more majestic and awesome than any former kingdoms in Judah, Israel, or the world (Revelation 7:9–10).

## **Implications and Actions**

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The kingdom of God begins with God-designed seeds being spread on the soil of people's hearts. The sower's task is to carry seed to the soil, then spread it onto the soil by sharing God's Word and life with others. We do our part, then God causes seeds to germinate and new life to grow out of them. People are born again, then move toward God, like the green blades growing out of the soil toward the sun. It is all enlivened by God, grown by God, and matured by God. Finally the plant produces new seeds that can be food for others or provide multiple seeds to plant to produce future fields of new life and growth.

God's kingdom started minutely small, yet grew into a kingdom that has citizens everywhere, speaking almost every language in the world. It is an everlasting kingdom that will have no end. Many have tried to crush it, belittle it, persecute or destroy it, yet it lives on.

## Questions

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1. Describe a verse of the Bible that “came alive” in your life, which God used to make some significant change(s) in your life. What changed in your life?
2. In your own words, describe what the kingdom of God is in your life today.
3. Share a small beginning in your life that has grown into something amazing.
4. Pray and ask God to bring to your mind three people who need to receive God’s kingdom seeds, and how to sow that seed into each person.

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**FOCAL TEXT**

**Mark 4:35–41**

**BACKGROUND**

**1 Peter 1:7; 4:12–16; 5:7;  
2 Corinthians 1:8–9;  
12:7–9; Isaiah 43:2–7**

# lesson

## When Jesus Is in Your Boat

### MAIN IDEA

God will test our faith in order to purify our faith.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

In the midst of my storms, do I focus on Jesus?

### STUDY AIM

To understand that Jesus will either calm the storm or calm you

### QUICK READ

God never promised that we would live a stormproof life. He just promises to be with us in the midst of our storms.

## Introduction

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Have you ever been in a boat when a storm came up, threatening to sink your boat? Fortunately, I have not. But we've all been in confusing, threatening situations when we cry out to God in prayer: "God, don't You care?" Sometimes we feel that all hope is lost.

The storm that arose in today's Scripture happened at the end of a very long, busy day. The day's events began in Mark 4:1, with large crowds gathered to hear Jesus teach. The crowds became so large that He got into a boat, moved it offshore a little, and taught.

Today's passage picks up in 4:35. Let's examine how the disciples saw Jesus' actions in three different ways during the trip to the other side of Galilee. G. Campbell Morgan pointed out that on this trip the disciples saw: Jesus Asleep (His human nature) and Jesus Awake (His Divine Nature). I am adding a third view of Jesus, which is: Jesus' Authority and Power over nature's forces, seen in 4:35–41, and His authority over supernatural forces in Mark 1:21–28; 5:1–20.

### Mark 4:35–41

<sup>35</sup> On that day, when evening came, He \*said to them, "Let's go over to the other side." <sup>36</sup> After dismissing the crowd, they \*took Him along with them in the boat, just as He was; and other boats were with Him. <sup>37</sup> And a fierce gale of wind \*developed, and the waves were breaking over the boat so much that the boat was already filling *with water*. <sup>38</sup> And yet Jesus Himself 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?" <sup>39</sup> And He got up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Hush, be still." And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm. <sup>40</sup> And He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?" <sup>41</sup> They became very much afraid and said to one another, "Who, then, is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?"

### **Jesus Asleep (4:35–38)**

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The story picks up as Jesus and the disciples are still in the boat, when Jesus said: "Let us go over to the other side." Having been surrounded by crowds all day Jesus was weary and needed some down time. Almost immediately after they set course, He was sound asleep. We see in 4:36 they left the crowds and took Jesus "just as He was," a way of saying they began the trip immediately without going to shore for provisions.

As they began the journey, Jesus laid His head on the center crossbench. The disciples saw Jesus asleep. Jesus' human body was like yours; when you get exhausted you fall asleep. Jesus had similar limitations brought on by His human body. He needed food, water, friends, purpose, and renewal via prayer, sleep, and rest.

One aspect of Jesus' sleeping, which we often overlook, is how carefree He was in His sleep. He was already meeting opposition from Jewish leaders. Now He is calmly, peacefully sleeping in the midst of the fiercest storm the seasoned fishermen had ever experienced. The boat was being hurled up and down, waves smashing, wind howling, yet Jesus slept peacefully through it. It

would be the touch and words of one of His disciples that would awaken Him.

## **Objectives of the Journey**

- Jesus needed some time away from the crowds, to sleep and recharge.
- Jesus' had a divine appointment awaiting Him on the other side, with the demon-possessed man.
- On the other side of the Sea resided many Gentiles, who still sat in the dark in the region of Gergesa, and the region of Decapolis. Jesus had come to bring salvation to the Gentiles, too, not just to the Jews.
- This journey begins a series of four miracles in Mark, with each miracle revealing something about Jesus, and confirming that Jesus is the Messiah.
- The demon possessed man on the other side desperately needed the deliverance that only Jesus could provide for Him. Jesus freed him from the demons, and the man became a missionary to his own people, i.e. the Gentiles. Jesus told him to go home and tell others what great things God had done for him (cf. Mark 5:19).

What could account for such peace and calmness? Jesus knew His life was in the Father's hands, and that only what the Father permitted to happen could impact Him. He had faith that since God wanted them to go across to the other side of the sea, they would arrive there.

Contrast that with the disciples, seasoned sailors, who were so worried and afraid that they awoke Jesus, chiding Him (4:38) saying: “Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?” They really thought the boat was about to go down.

Jesus was in the center of the boat, but not in the center of their faith. Obviously, they believed Jesus could do something to save them, if He was awake, but if it got much worse, no one could save them.

## Jesus Awake (4:39–40)

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As Jesus awakened, He prepared to do the first of four miracles in Mark 4–5. Scholars have analyzed Jesus’ miracles and discovered a literary form in which His miracles are often presented when written down. Williamson uses Jesus’ calming of the sea to reveal this pattern used in miracle stories. This pattern is noted below.

### **The Literary Form of a Miracle Story**

The miracle story/event begins with a *setting or context of the miracle* (4:35–36), a *problem* (4:37–38), a *solution* (4:39a), *evidence that a miracle occurred* (4:39b), and a *response of wonder and awe* (4:41).

One thing we notice about Jesus is His composure. He did not wake up angry at the disciples for waking Him, nor upset over them challenging whether or not He really cared. He stood up, faced the wind and waves and decisively rebuked the wind to be calm, and commanded the waves to “hush, be still.” Immediately

the winds stopped; the waves became a sea of glass. Such a powerful storm takes time to calm down; Jesus' commands showed that He controlled the forces of nature.

In the Old Testament only God had the power to control natural forces. So when the disciples saw Jesus stand up and speak two commands, and instantly the commands were carried out, they had their eyes opened that Jesus was much more than a mere prophet. He was God Himself.

The choice of the words used in this miracle brings insight into how Jesus dealt with this storm. Jesus used the same words in rebuking the storm as He did in casting out the demons in a possessed person in Mark 1:24–27. He rebuked the wind, and commanded the storm waves to be muzzled, in both cases. Using the same wording in 4:39 in dealing with the storm as He used in 1:24–27 in disarming a demon, possibly implies a demonic component to this storm, which explains why the fishermen/sailors were so terrified of this one (see: Brooks, G. Campbell Morgan, and Lane).

Does this mean that each time there is a storm, a demon is responsible? No, it does not. Storms are a normal part of nature. We are not to obsess with such things, nor are we to deny that such things sometimes occur. Satan sent a similar storm (whirlwind, which is the word for the storm here ... a tornado? Hurricane?), which killed Job's children. It was a part of the testing of the faith of the righteous. Paul was in a shipwreck as well, where the ship broke up (Acts 27:21–32). Was that shipwreck demonic? Probably not. God warned Paul about it ahead of time, and of the outcome.

If one chooses to see the forces of evil involved in this particular storm, what would be the motivation for it? Jesus and the disciples were heading for Gentile territory to spread the Gospel there. The first person they met ashore was a demon possessed man, whose strength and destructiveness no chains could contain. Jesus cast the demons out of the man and discovered the demon was named “Legion, for we are many.” The demons asked permission to be sent into a herd of pigs, which Jesus permitted. Then the herd of 2000 pigs rushed down into the sea and drowned.

Jesus had freed a human that everyone feared, and no one could restrain. The man who had been crazy and destructive, was now in his right mind. He wanted to leave and go with Jesus, but Jesus told him to instead go to his home and tell the people there the great things the Lord had done for him.

In my experience, whenever God is about to make a spiritual breakthrough for His kingdom, the forces of Satan try to prevent it from happening. Either way, God won, and a demon–possessed man became a God–possessed man. His destructive life had changed into a constructive life. The kingdom of God had arrived and was driving back the kingdom of darkness (Luke 11:20) among the Gentiles.

Like all miracles in which Jesus was involved, the miracle’s purpose was to elevate and validate Jesus as truly being superlative above all others, and therefore God Incarnate. God is always the real miracle worker.

## **Jesus' Authority Over Nature's Forces (4:39–41)**

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The major point in this miracle is that Jesus, by speaking two simple commands, transformed ferociously violent winds and waves into a state of instant calm and stillness. The dramatic and instant change revealed the miracle. If the storm just coincidentally subsided, the wind would diminish slowly. The waves would not have become glassy smooth water in an instant.

Jesus spoke a command to the storm: “Hush!” (Silence!) and to the waves “Be still!” (Be muzzled!).

The change was instantaneous. It is kind of like the man in the TV advertisement for pain medicine, when he took it and said: “The pain is gone.” His wife said, “I am glad it helped.” His response was, “No you don’t understand. The pain is *gone*.” After Jesus commanded cessation and calm, the wind and sea became totally still, calm, and quiet. “It became perfectly calm” (4:39).

Once Jesus dealt with the storm, He made a teaching point by asking the disciples two self-evaluation questions in Mark 4:40: “Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?” They had faith to believe that Jesus could solve the problem, or they would not have awakened Him. They believed He was capable of doing more than they imagined, but they (like most of us) had a tough time trusting God that He *would* protect them. Their faith was informational but was not relational. They believed Jesus would know how to solve the dilemma. But they never dreamed that with two words the winds and the waves would instantly become peaceful and calm.

The disciples who feared a storm, became more fearful of standing in the presence of God, who alone can calm waves and



storms (see Psalm 107:23–30). They grasped that Jesus was not a mere Rabbi or mere prophet. He was God, who has instant power over the forces and powers of nature. This revelation shook them to their core, and they were in awe of Jesus, realizing He was God Himself (4:41). They looked at each other, saying: “Who, then, is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?”

## **Implications and Actions**

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Jesus is fully human and fully God. When we look at Jesus asleep in the boat, we find it easier to identify with Him. Jesus got tired, and needed down time, a break in the schedule, or time to re-charge, as do we. By the power of God living within us, we can go beyond the call of duty. But our humanity is always with us.

Jesus, even when being fully human, had a peace and composure about Him that revealed God’s presence in His life. He could sleep, knowing that His Father never sleeps. The more we trust God, and embrace His constant watch and care over us, the least fearful we will become.

Jesus was also fully God, the Son of God. He could vanquish storms by speaking two commands. The things that are so threatening to us, like capsizing in a boat in a storm, caused no fear in His life. Faith and fear are opposite concepts and produce opposite attitudes. When we become a Christian, God Himself comes to reside within us (John 14:23). Jesus said He would never leave us. Nothing can defeat Jesus. As we trust Him and God the Father to watch over us and take care of us, our dispositions change. We can experience calm in whatever storm we find ourselves, because the One who can calm any storm lives inside us.

Jesus has received all authority in Heaven and Earth (Matthew 28:18–20), and He lives within every believer. He has promised never to leave us nor forsake us. In Luke 12:32, Jesus tells us: “Do not be afraid, little flock, because your Father has chosen to give you the kingdom.”

The miracle ends with the disciples asking a key question that each of us needs to satisfactorily answer: “Who, then, is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?”

## Questions: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Write down five things in your human lifestyle that Jesus also exhibited, due to His humanity.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. When you awake to find yourself in a state of crisis, do you go into “confident mode” or “crisis mode?” Describe several attitudes or actions you exhibit when you are in your “confident mode.” Now describe several attitudes or behaviors you exhibit when in your “crisis mode.”

3. How would you answer the disciples' question in Mark 4:31: "Who, then, is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him"? Write your answers below.
  
4. The winds and waves obey Jesus, yet we all too frequently don't obey Him. Why do you think we don't instantly obey Jesus?

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1983), 101.

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# lesson 5

# When Pigs Fly!

## MAIN IDEA

Jesus is Lord over Satan and his demons.

## QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Why is my testimony an important tool to help someone else?

## STUDY AIM

To understand that if Jesus was willing to cross a dangerous, stormy body of water just to help one troubled man, you need to know He cares for you in the same way

## QUICK READ

After Jesus cast out the demons, He did not do anything else there. He got back in the boat and sailed back to Galilee on the other side of the lake. The only reason He crossed the lake was to deliver this demonized man.

## Introduction

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I left the hospital feeling numb. It was the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. I donned the necessary protective equipment from head to toe, just to hold my grandfather's hand while he died. When I made it to my car, grief overwhelmed me. I called my husband, but all I could do was sob into the phone. "I'll be right there," he said. We lived an hour away. For his own safety, he had every reason not to expose himself to the dangers of the hospital. However, he came for me.

Jesus always comes to us in our time of need. In today's passage, Jesus had just braved a storm with His disciples. He did one thing while He was on the other side of the lake: He healed a demon-possessed man. Jesus showed that He is Lord over Satan and his demons and that He prioritizes the deliverance of one tortured soul. As a shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to find the lost sheep (Matthew 18:12–14), Jesus takes pains to meet our needs. He shows us His power over our afflictions and leads others to Himself through our testimony of His mercy.

### **Mark 5:1–20**

<sup>1</sup> They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. <sup>2</sup> When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. <sup>3</sup> This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. <sup>4</sup> For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. <sup>5</sup> Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

<sup>6</sup> When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him.<sup>7</sup> He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!"<sup>8</sup> For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you impure spirit!"

<sup>9</sup> Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" "My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many."<sup>10</sup> And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

<sup>11</sup> A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside.<sup>12</sup> The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them."<sup>13</sup> He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

<sup>14</sup> Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened.<sup>15</sup> When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid.<sup>16</sup> Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well.<sup>17</sup> Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

<sup>18</sup> As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him.<sup>19</sup> Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you."<sup>20</sup> So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

## **Jesus Met a Demon-Possessed Man in His Suffering (5:1–8)**

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As we learned in the last lesson, Jesus and His disciples had just survived a stormy crossing where Jesus revealed His power over the natural elements. When Jesus encountered the demons that had possessed the Gerasene man, He proved His power over the spiritual realm as well. Biblical scholars have debated the exact location of this incident due to textual variants that alternately call this area the region of “Gadarenes” or “Gergesenes.” These variants probably developed as interpreters tried to resolve the topological quandary of placing this narrative in the city of Gerasa, which was twenty-three miles from the Sea of Galilee. The options that these variants suggest, i.e., the city of Gadara or the region of Gergesenes, only trade one topological quandary for another, since Gadara had no steep caves, and the existence of a city called Gergesa is only speculative. Regardless of the answer to these questions, the narrative indicates a setting somewhere in a Gentile region on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. Mark mentioned pigs, which Jews considered unclean (Leviticus 11:7–8), and referenced the Decapolis (Mark 5:20), which was a well-known Gentile metropolis. This story is the first in Mark’s Gospel that took place outside of the Jewish community.

In Mark’s account, when Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit immediately came out from the tombs to meet Him. With his typical vivid description, Mark explained the affliction that this man faced daily: 1) Social exclusion: He lived alone in the tombs where, understandably, no one else wanted to live. 2) Mania: He experienced such hyperactive strength that no one



could bind him even with chains; even if they managed to bind him, he would break the chains apart. 3) Self-harm and depression: Night and day he cried out and cut himself with stones. The parallel accounts of this narrative in Matthew and Luke also reveal that he often went around without clothes (Luke 8:27) and became violent with others who tried to pass by him (Matthew 8:28).

## **Demon Possession and Mental Illness**

Mark's description of the Gerasene demoniac evoked the modern symptoms of a mental illness. Biblical scholars and psychiatrists have often debated the possibility that rather than demon possession, this man may have suffered from extreme bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, or even dissociative identity disorder. The modern sensibility to explain his affliction as a psychiatric disorder minimizes the theological truth of Jesus' power over Satan and his demons. However, equating mental illness with demon possession can ostracize an already marginalized group in our church and in our entire society. Instead, we should uphold the truth that this passage teaches us about Jesus' power over evil while also acknowledging that human illness often includes a spiritual dimension. As we face our own struggles and counsel our neighbors, Jesus' deliverance encompasses the whole person, breaking down chains of physical, mental, spiritual, and social forces that would keep us from living in the freedom He has promised us as Christians (Galatians 5:1).

Despite the violent behaviors that alienated the Gerasene demoniac from his community, Jesus still made the perilous journey across the sea for the sole purpose of healing this man. Upon seeing Jesus, the man knelt before Him—not to worship Jesus as some did, but to submit to Him in recognition of His authority and to beg for Jesus to leave him alone (Mark 5:7). The demon(s) speaking through the man acknowledged Jesus as the Son of the Most High God. While others around Jesus might question His identity (Matthew 13:55; Luke 4:22; John 6:42), this demon knew who He was in relation to the God of Israel and had enough sense to be afraid (cf. James 2:19). He knew that Jesus had come to establish the kingdom of God on earth, and so he begged for Jesus not to send him to his eternal punishment (Matthew 8:29; cf. Revelation 12:9; Matthew 25:41).

## **Jesus Has Complete Authority Over the Forces of Evil (5:9–13)**

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In response to the suffering of the man before Him, Jesus conversed with the demon and met the demoniac where he was. In the ancient world, the prevailing cultural belief was that knowing a spirit's name gave one power over it. While the demon(s) might have been trying to use Jesus' name against Him, Jesus turned the tables on him and asked for his name (Mark 5:9). The demon replied, "I am Legion, for we are many." A legion was a military regiment in the Roman army that included about 6,000 men. While the number of demons probably was not 6,000 exactly, this name certainly illustrated the magnitude of the force these impure spirits amassed against Jesus. Mark seemed to treat this

explanation as factual rather than a boast by the demon because he continued the narrative with plural references to demons.

Again, the demons begged not to be sent out of the area (Mark 5:10), which would presumably restrain their power among these people. The parallel passage in Luke has them begging not to be sent into the abyss where they would await eternal judgment (Luke 8:31). Either way, the demons were bargaining to gain a compromise from Jesus, which culminated in their request to enter the herd of pigs (Mark 5:12). In an ultimate act of authority, Jesus allowed this concession. As Lord over the forces of evil, which is more awesome: to cast out thousands of demons or to send them to possess a herd of two-thousand pigs? Mark added to the drama of the scene with his visual of thousands of pigs stampeding down a steep hill and drowning in the lake (Mark 5:13). Some scholars have questioned why Jesus would allow this destruction of property and the livelihood of these pig herders. However, Jesus considered this man's soul to be worth the material loss.

## **Jesus Charged the Demoniac to Share His Testimony of God's Mercy (5:14–20)**

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In response to this miracle, the pig-herders displayed the first instance in this narrative of the power of testimony. The biblical pattern of testimony normally has an agent (someone who gives testimony), a subject (what their testimony is), a recipient (someone who receives an effect from the testimony), and a result (how the testimony affects the recipient). In this first case, the pig-herders are the agents, the subject of their testimony cov-

ers “what had happened” with the demoniac and the pigs, and their testimony affected everyone in the town and countryside. When the recipients came to see the evidence of this testimony for themselves, the result is that they were afraid (Mark 5:15). They were so afraid, in fact, that they pleaded with Jesus to leave. This man, who they knew to be walking around naked and generally acting crazy, was instead sitting with Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. Jesus’ great power over the demons was singularly terrifying to this superstitious people.

The demoniac presented a picture of true conversion. He was completely changed—the exact opposite of what he had been—totally transformed by his encounter with Jesus’ power. When Jesus submitted to the people’s request that He leave, the demoniac requested to go with Jesus. Literally, he asked that he might “be with Him” (Mark 5:18a). This earnest desire to be with Jesus certainly echoes what we all have felt in those early days of our own conversion—that feeling of unrestricted joy, never wanting to leave God’s presence for fear of returning to our former selves. Instead of granting this seemingly reasonable request, Jesus told the demoniac to go home and share his testimony with his own people.

In this second instance of testimony, we have a completely different breakdown from the first. The agent is the demoniac himself, a recipient of this miracle rather than a third-party observer. The subject of his testimony was “how much the Lord has done for [him], and how he has had mercy on [him]” (Mark 5:19)—i.e., not only what God had done for him, but also how God had demonstrated mercy to him through this miracle. The recipients of this testimony were all the people of his own country, the en-

tire Decapolis—a Gentile region from which Jesus had been driven and which perhaps would never have another opportunity to hear about Him. Finally, the result of the demoniac’s testimony was not fear but, rather, awe (Mark 5:20); these non-God-fearing Gentiles marveled at what the God of Israel could do.

### **Sharing My Testimony**

How to share my testimony like the demoniac:

- Receive the miracle of God’s deliverance. If Jesus has not set you apart, your story will have no impact on others.
- Focus on God’s mercy in your content. How did God show you mercy in your salvation?
- Share your testimony with the people around you. No one else has the same impact that you do.
- Lead others in worship of the Lord. Sharing your testimony is not the end of your influence. We are called to make disciples by helping others marvel at what the Lord will do.

One man’s report of what God had done for him and how Jesus had shown him mercy in his suffering caused an entire region to marvel at Jesus’ power over evil. While the demoniac probably did not understand at the time why Jesus did not allow him to be with Him, it is evident he fulfilled God’s purpose of salvation for the Decapolis simply by sharing his own story. This small act of sharing of his testimony had exponential results.

## Implications and Actions

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The healing of the Gerasene demoniac has shown us that our God not only has compassion for the suffering but also acts to relieve that suffering. We can expect God to act similarly for us when we are suffering. We are God's hands and feet to act to alleviate others' suffering, even if we have to go out of our way to do so. Our Savior is also Lord over Satan and his demons. No evil exists that Jesus is not able to overcome, whether our own besetting sin or the hurt we experience due to others' sin. We can count on Him to be capable of our deliverance. Furthermore, we should be availing ourselves of the authority over evil He has passed to us (Matthew 10:1; Luke 10:19; Ephesians 6:11–13). Finally, God uses the testimonies of His people to reach others. He has saved us in order to proclaim His salvation to others and give light to those in darkness (Luke 1:76–79). It is important for us to address what is holding us back from sharing our testimony and being used by God to change someone else's life.

## Questions

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1. How have you seen God intervene in your life in times of suffering or hardship? What did you learn about God's compassion during this time?

2. What are some of the ways you have seen the forces of evil at work in the world around you? If we truly believe in Jesus' authority over Satan and his demons, how should we respond to these situations?
  
3. What normally holds you back from following Jesus' commission to share your testimony with others?
  
4. How can you adapt the content or method of sharing your testimony to communicate your story of transformation like the demoniac did?
  
5. Why would your testimony be powerful to help lead others to Jesus?

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**FOCAL TEXT**

Mark 5:21–23, 35–43

**BACKGROUND**

Philippians 1:21–24;  
2 Samuel 22:7;  
1 Thessalonians 4:13;  
Habakkuk 2:3;  
Jeremiah 33:3

# lesson 6



# Never Without Hope

## MAIN IDEA

Where there is Jesus, there is hope.

## QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Am I ready to face death?

## STUDY AIM

To understand that Jesus gives us hope even when death is involved

## QUICK READ

Jesus was teaching us that when we face grief, we should never lose sight of the fact that He gives hope whenever there is death. Grief is a painful process for everyone, including Christians, but it is a process, not a destination.

## Introduction

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The first time I ever saw a corpse was at my grandmother's funeral. I looked down at her pale face, caked with too much make-up, and thought, "That is not my grandmother." I missed the light and joy that I always felt in her presence, but I did not grieve as if that comfort were gone forever. My grief did not despair a loss but, rather, mourned a separation. Our distance was temporary, because while her soul was not in her body anymore, she was not dead. There are many complexities to grief I did not understand then, but I believe God showed me that as Christians, our grief is not without hope because we serve the God of Resurrection Life.

In today's passage, Jairus sought out Jesus to heal his sick daughter. When she died, the mourners viewed death as the end of all hope. Instead, Jesus demonstrated that through faith, there is always hope. Through the miracle of resurrection, we see that death is not the end. As a result, we do not need to despair when it claims our loved ones or fear its approach in our own lives.

### **Mark 5:21–23, 35–43**

<sup>21</sup> When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. <sup>22</sup> Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. <sup>23</sup> He pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live."

<sup>35</sup> While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher anymore?"

<sup>36</sup> Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, "Don't be afraid; just believe."

<sup>37</sup> He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. <sup>38</sup> When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. <sup>39</sup> He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep." <sup>40</sup> But they laughed at him.

After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. <sup>41</sup> He took her by the hand and said to her, "*Talitha koum!*" (which means "Little girl, I say to you, get up!"). <sup>42</sup> Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. <sup>43</sup> He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

### **Jairus' Example of Faith (5:21–23)**

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After Jesus left the Gerasene demoniac, He returned to the other side of the lake to a waiting crowd (Mark 5:21). At this point in Jesus' ministry, people had gathered to hear His teaching and to seek His touch to heal their diseases (Mark 3:10). From the crowd, a man named Jairus approached Jesus to beg healing for his little daughter (Mark 5:22).

## Jairus' Role in the Synagogue

Historically, Jewish synagogues were centers for education and local government, but their primary function shifted to religious practice during the Jewish exile after the destruction of the Temple. By Jesus' time, even with the Temple rebuilt, synagogues still served as the epicenter of local religious life. In today's passage, Mark described Jairus as "one of the synagogue leaders" (Mark 5:22), which referred to a particular role within the leadership hierarchy called the *archisynagōgos*. This "ruler" or "president" was a respected community leader overseeing the administration of each worship service. Instead of an ordained pastor, these laypersons led religious ceremonies, appointed other worship leaders, and assigned prayer and Scripture reading to other congregants (Acts 13:15). The *archisynagōgos* even financed the construction and upkeep of the building. They had authority to chastise impropriety during worship, such as when these leaders chided Jesus for healing on the Sabbath (Luke 13:14). The ruler of the synagogue was not an honorary title, but an esteemed position with significant duties in the religious life of their community.

Jairus' approach to Jesus models how we should seek the Lord today. First, he fell at Jesus' feet (Mark 5:22). Elsewhere in Scripture, this posture signaled the humility and devotion of a lesser party before someone of higher rank, especially in order to petition them (Matthew 18:29; Luke 5:12; John 11:32). Although Jairus is an important man as an *archisynagōgos*, he humbled

himself and treated Jesus as someone even more eminent. Secondly, Jairus pleaded earnestly with Jesus (Mark 5:23a). The language suggests that Jairus even asked repeatedly. After submitting to Jesus' authority, Jairus urgently entreated and implored Jesus for His healing. Jairus expressed confidence that if Jesus would just place His hands on his daughter, she would be healed and she would live (Mark 5:23b). In Jewish and pagan culture, it was a common assumption that the laying of hands on a person was the method that imparted healing. Jairus sought out Jesus believing He was capable of healing his daughter, or more literally, saving her. In his Gospel, Mark often described physical healing with the language of salvation. When Jesus healed someone of an infirmity, He also delivered them spiritually from their sin (Mark 2:10). Jairus had faith not only that Jesus could physically restore his daughter but also that He could save her spiritually. Jairus' example of faith teaches us that in our distress, we should humble ourselves before Jesus, earnestly plead our need, and believe that He has the power to intervene in our circumstance (cf. 2 Samuel 22:7; Jeremiah 33:3).

### **Jesus' Exhortation to Believe in the Face of Death (5:35–40)**

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While on the way to Jairus' home, Jairus received word that his daughter had died. These people urged Jairus not to bother Jesus any longer (Mark 5:35), presumably because they assumed Jesus could not do anything now that she was dead. Having overheard what was not addressed to Him, Jesus told Jairus two things: "Don't be afraid; just believe" (Mark 5:36).

We can empathize with Jairus—a father who has just heard about the death of his daughter. He no doubt feared the many “what-ifs” of his new situation—most immediately, how could he go home to face a household in mourning. In the face of grief, we have many unknowns to fear without someone we love. Jesus’ first exhortation to Jairus is in the negative: “Don’t be afraid.” Jesus often repeats this phrase throughout His teaching and interaction with the disciples (Matthew 10:31; 14:27; 17:7; Luke 5:10; 12:7), not to mention all the times God urged His people not to fear in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 31:6; Isaiah 41:10; Haggai 2:5). This imperative command carries the sense of “Stop being afraid.” He commanded Jairus not to focus on the fear, but instead, to focus on his faith.

Jesus then gave Jairus a positive exhortation: “Just believe.” He offered Jairus an alternative to his fear—hold onto your faith. Although Jesus accepted the reality of this girl’s death, He did not accept its finality. He urged Jairus to keep believing, to maintain his certainty that Jesus could still save his daughter. This admonition evokes Jesus’ conversation with Martha after the death of her brother Lazarus. Martha accused Jesus that if He had been there, Lazarus would not have died. Jesus proclaimed that Lazarus would live again because He is the Resurrection and the Life. Then He challenged Martha to believe Him capable of this power over life and death (John 11:23–27). Similarly, He asked the same faith of Jairus, and Jairus rose to the challenge. He does not try to talk Jesus out of coming to his house as the messengers had suggested.

At this point, Jesus restricted the witnesses of this miracle to his closest circle of disciples, Peter, James, and John (Mark 5:37),

as He would do at His Transfiguration and again in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 9:2; 14:33). Upon reaching Jairus' house, a "commotion" met them, i.e., an assembly of mourners crying and wailing loudly (Mark 5:38). It was common practice for Jews, especially affluent ones, to hire professional mourners upon someone's death. Since Jairus was an *archisynagōgos*, his wealth probably afforded him quite a crowd of mourners. In addition to the rest of Jairus' family, these people created such a cacophony of uproar that could not have come solely from sincere emotion. Jesus, as He did often with the Pharisees, called out this "put-upon" emotion and asked the crowd why they cried since the girl was not dead, merely asleep (Mark 5:39). Some scholars have taken this statement to mean that the girl was comatose rather than dead. However, it is more likely here that Jesus used the common euphemism of sleep for death, while also intending to foreshadow His ability to resurrect her. The mourners merely laughed, mocking Jesus and revealing their true heart of unbelief. They took Jesus' statement to mean that He doubted the child was dead, while they knew it for a fact. Unlike Jairus' response of faith in the face of death, they scoffed, certain that Jesus could do nothing to change the irrefutable fact of death. In response, Jesus excluded the non-believing mourners from the miracle He was about to perform, putting everyone out except the mother and father who had the faith to come to Him in the first place (Mark 5:40).

In the face of death, Jesus advises us not to be afraid, but instead to believe that death is not the end. As Paul exhorted the church at Thessalonica, we do not grieve without hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). It is not laughable that we should believe in life after death; Jesus will surely resurrect believers who have died

upon His Second Coming. Around Jesus, death is not a foregone conclusion to life. Though it is a separation, it is not an irreparable one. When we grieve, then, it is a process, not a destination, through which we hold onto belief in God's power of resurrection.

## **Grieving With Hope**

How to grieve as Christians:

- It is right to weep for those we have lost (Ecclesiastes 3:4), as even Jesus did at Lazarus' death though He knew He would resurrect him (John 11:35).
- Do not sorrow alone. Join in community with others who grieve (Romans 12:15).
- Allow our compassionate God to comfort you (Psalm 147:3; Matthew 5:4).
- Whatever the depth of your grief, anticipate that your joy will have that same measure at Jesus' Second Coming when we are reunited (1 Thessalonians 4:13–17).
- Embrace the ache for Heaven where we will have no more sorrow, death, or pain (Revelation 21:4).

## **Jesus Resurrected a Dead Girl (5:41–43)**

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In the room where Jairus' daughter lay, Jesus took her hand and told her to "get up" (Mark 5:41). Mark recorded the original Aramaic words that Jesus spoke to her: "*Talitha koum.*" During the first century AD, Aramaic was the most prominent language used by common people, and so it was the language Jesus most likely



used in His teaching. Mark probably retained the Aramaic phrasing here as part of the eyewitness testimony he received from Peter in writing this Gospel. When Mark translated this phrase into Greek for his readers, he intentionally chose language reminiscent of resurrection language elsewhere in Scripture (Mark 12:26–27; Luke 7:22; 1 Corinthians 15; Ephesians 5:14).

At only Jesus' word, the girl immediately rose and walked around the room (Mark 5:42), showing Jesus' authority not only to resurrect the girl but also to restore her to full health. In response, the witnesses are completely beside themselves with amazement. They cannot explain this miracle apart from Jesus' inherent power. However, Jesus urged them not to let anyone know about this miracle (Mark 5:43). In Mark's Gospel Jesus often repeated this refrain after He performed a miracle (Mark 1:44; 7:36; 8:30). In this case, it does not seem possible for them to have kept this miracle a secret since a crowd of mourners sat outside the door. Possibly, Jesus wanted time to get away before more crowds accosted Him for healing, but, more likely, He did not want the miracle to overshadow the message He came to proclaim about the inauguration of the kingdom of God (Mark 1:15). With this admonition to silence, Jesus also told them to give the girl something to eat (Mark 5:43), further proof of her renewed life (cf. Luke 24:41–43) as well as Jesus' care for her physical needs.

Jesus' miraculous power over death also encourages us not to fear our own death. Part of Jesus' redemption involved delivering us from the slavery of being afraid of death (Hebrews 2:14–15). As Christians, whether we live or die should not matter to our well-being. If we live, we grow in Christ. If we die, we go to be

with Him forever. Either way we do not lose Christ (Philippians 1:21–24).

### **Case Study: Am I Ready to Face Death?**

Joseph is 60 years old and a lifelong churchgoer; he has just read on social media that his high school sweetheart has died. They had not spoken since the last high school reunion many years ago, but Joseph has been downcast since hearing this news. “She was so young...Only as old as I am,” Joseph thinks. This proximity to death has caused Joseph to start wondering if he is truly ready for his own death. If you were in Joseph’s situation, what would prevent you from being confident in facing your own death?

### **Implications and Actions**

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The miracle Jesus performed in the resurrection of Jairus’ daughter should have a profound impact on our relationship to God today. Do we respond to suffering, disappointment, and even death with the faith that Jairus displayed? Certainly, Jairus’ faith opened the door for Jesus to display His glory. Likewise, anytime we respond to hardship with faith, humbly pleading with God for His healing, we are opening the door for God to intervene for His glory in our suffering. Even if we do not see that healing in this life, we honor God with our faith in His power. Jesus’ counsel to Jairus in the face of death also reminds us to replace fear with faith. Death is not the end of all hope and so is not an outcome to dread or despair. Knowing Jesus’ power over life and death,

we can face even our own death with confidence and courage. If we live, we live for Him; if we die, we gain an eternity with Him. Because of Jesus, we always have hope whenever there is death.

## **Questions**

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1. Have you ever had a time when you needed to plead earnestly for God's intervention? What was the situation and how did God respond?
  
2. How does the fear of death impact the way someone lives their life? Is there any way it has impacted your decisions throughout your life?
  
3. Based on your own experience of grief, how is grieving without hope different from grieving with hope as a Christian?

4. What, if any, doubts or questions do you have about the resurrection of believers after death?

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# lesson 7

# The Power of a Desperate Faith

## MAIN IDEA

Suffering is a part of life, but Jesus gives us hope.

## QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Am I willing to reach for the hem of His garment?

## STUDY AIM

To understand that casual contact with Christ is not the same as a desperate grasp of faith

## QUICK READ

Suffering is God's way of making us stronger, and suffering forces us to depend on Him.

## Introduction

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The moment my feet hit the floor every morning, my cat nuzzles against my legs. He squeaks and chirps at me to follow him into the kitchen to get his breakfast. My husband and I have both tripped over him in the mornings because of how doggedly he gets underfoot. You would think that we starve him for how desperate he is for food.

In worship, we sing about being desperate for God, but true desperation is not just that hunger my cat feels every morning. True desperation involves suffering that cannot be relieved any other way than through Him and a reckless willingness to bear the consequences of any risk to obtain the satisfaction of that need. In today's passage, we will meet a woman whose extreme agony compelled her to grasp for Jesus' healing. She displayed all the elements of true desperation—that earnest longing to be healed, an incurable disease for which she could not find healing, and a daring, last-ditch effort for restoration. Her example will challenge us to reframe our view of suffering and to evaluate our own level of desperation for Jesus.

### Mark 5:21–34

<sup>21</sup> When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. <sup>22</sup> Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. <sup>23</sup> He pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." <sup>24</sup> So Jesus went with him.

A large crowd followed and pressed around him. <sup>25</sup> And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. <sup>26</sup> She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. <sup>27</sup> When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, <sup>28</sup> because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." <sup>29</sup> Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

<sup>30</sup> At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"

<sup>31</sup> "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?' "

<sup>32</sup> But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. <sup>33</sup> Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. <sup>34</sup> He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

## **A Suffering Woman (5:21–26)**

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As Jesus followed Jairus to heal his daughter, a great crowd "gathered around Him," so dense that they had no room to move (Mark 5:21–24). At the center, Jesus Himself was pressed upon every side. Among the crowd, there was a woman who had been suffering from chronic bleeding, most likely menstrual, for twelve years (Mark 5:25). Other than the obvious physical pain, her bleeding also caused her to remain ritually unclean. Leviticus 15:25–30 prescribed that a woman who bled at a time other than

her monthly cycle should remain ritually unclean for the entire interval that the discharge lasted plus an additional seven days. Such a state of supposed contamination prevented a bleeding woman from entering the Temple, limiting her ability to participate in most of Jewish religious life. Since someone who touched such a woman would become unclean themselves, the desperate woman likely lived as a social outcast that most pious Jews would have avoided. Juxtaposed with the socially esteemed *archisynagōgos*, Jairus, Jesus' interactions in this chapter displayed His disregard for social status in dispensing healing.

This woman endured many hardships at the hands of countless doctors, spending everything she had, and her condition had worsened rather than improved (Mark 5:26). If a modern patient were telling this story, they would no doubt include the names of these doctors to warn others away from them. The failure of this woman's doctors was not an indictment of them specifically, but rather, made it undeniable that this woman's disease was incurable (Luke 8:43). It would be all the more miraculous when Jesus could heal her. The measures the woman had taken also highlighted her own desperation. Jesus was her last hope of healing; she likely would not have survived much longer without His intervention.

Suffering is an inescapable fact of life. We may not all have a terminal diagnosis or chronic illness, but we have all experienced a situation that we would not have chosen for ourselves—something maybe we even asked God to take away. Unfortunately, because we live in a world marred by sin, we will never live without suffering on this side of Heaven. However, God has not left us without hope. First, He has a divine purpose for our suffering



(Romans 8:18, 28). When we are weak, His power is made perfect in us (2 Corinthians 12:9). When we suffer, we must depend on Him in new ways that help us to grow closer to Him. Would the desperate woman have sought out Jesus if she did not need His help so badly? It is often the desperate needs born of great suffering that teach us how to reach for Jesus. Second, Jesus has the power to heal us. For some, healing comes in this life, as it would for the desperate woman, so we can share what God has done for us. For others, full healing will only come in Heaven where all suffering will be erased (Revelation 21:4). While suffering may last for this life, it will not last forever. In Jesus, we have hope even in the middle of affliction.

### **An Act of Desperate Faith (5:27–29)**

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The desperate woman faced her impending death, with no other options for treatment and no money to pay for more medical care. But everything changed for her when she “heard about Jesus” (Mark 5:27). Literally, she heard “the things about Jesus,” i.e., the reports concerning His miracles. Just from hearing what Jesus had done for others, she believed He could do the same for her. However, she had a problem: Jesus was a holy man of God, and she would transmit her uncleanness to Him if He touched her. So, she initiated her surreptitious approach from behind to touch His cloak (Mark 5:28). Likely, her idea was inspired by the ancient superstition that someone’s power transferred to their clothes (cf. Acts 19:11–12). The crowds certainly circulated this idea about Jesus’ clothes in their reports of His healings (Mark 3:10; 6:56).

The wording of verse 28 could mean that the woman thought, “If I *just* touch His clothes,” or “If I touch *just* His clothes.” Was her scheme about getting through the crowd merely to touch Him, or was it about touching only the small part she could reach? Either way, the woman reckoned that she would be healed (Mark 5:28b). Like Jairus’ faith in Jesus’ healing, the woman believed Jesus would both physically restore and spiritually deliver her. Considering the extent of her religious exclusion, salvation was equally as appealing as healing for the desperate woman.

## **The Edge of His Cloak**

Matthew’s Gospel specified that the woman touched “the edge of [Jesus’] cloak” (Matthew 9:20). While potentially the hem of His robe, this phrase likely referred to an article of dress outlined in the Torah for Jewish males known as *tsivith*. Jews attached twisted cords to the four corners of their outer garments with a blue cord (Deuteronomy 22:12; Numbers 15:38). The *tsivith* provided a visual reminder to obey all God’s commands and represented one’s commitment to observing the Law (Numbers 15:37–41). Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for making their tassels longer to impress others with their piety (Matthew 23:5), but Jesus likely wore such tassels Himself according to Mosaic Law. Jews wore their outer garments with one long, loose end thrown over their shoulder. It was this corner tassel that the desperate woman could have reached from behind. She chose to touch the one part of Jesus’ garment that signified His ritual purity, further emphasizing the connection between healing and spiritual cleansing in this encounter.

Immediately after touching His cloak, her bleeding stopped. In one moment, twelve years of agony ceased. Her body felt sound, so she knew she had been freed from her suffering (Mark 5:29). While that freedom took place in one moment, it would have continuing effects on her state of being in the future. The word for suffering used here (*mastix*) signified great torment. In other contexts, it referred to a scourge or plague sent from God. While this sense was not necessarily intended in this case, the word choice does remind us that this woman's suffering caused separation from God; the figurative effect of her disease was like a scourge. Becoming free from this suffering then involved repairing the breach that contamination had wrought and making her clean once more.

The story of the desperate woman flies in the face of what some call armchair Christianity. It was not enough for her simply to hear about what Jesus had done. She sought Him out to experience His healing for herself. She knew her life was not sustainable the way it was so she desperately reached for the new life only Jesus could supply. For us today, casual contact with Jesus will never satisfy the earnest desires of our hearts, and it will never relieve the heavy weight of suffering. Only when we are desperate enough to grasp for deliverance will we see God's power truly at work in our lives.

### **Jesus Sought Out the Desperate Woman (5:30–32)**

Immediately, Jesus recognized that power had departed from Him (Mark 5:30). Somehow, this healing involved an unconscious effort on Jesus' part. The change that Jesus recognized was sim-

ilar to the change the woman felt in her body that indicated her return to health. Jesus performed the healing subconsciously, then, rather than involuntarily. Jesus then turned to the crowd and asked who had touched His clothes. Possibly, Jesus did not know who touched Him, as part of the limitations His humanity placed on His divine omniscience while on earth. Or, perhaps, Jesus knew who had touched Him and was giving her a chance to identify herself. Either way, the vivid description of Jesus looking around, trying to see the one who had touched Him, certainly heightens the drama of the narrative.

Jesus' question baffled the disciples; how were they supposed to locate this person when the crowd was pressing in on all sides? They responded rather sarcastically, "You see all the people crowding against you, and yet you can ask, Who touched me?" (Mark 5:31). Perhaps the disciples were concerned for Jesus to get to Jairus' house quickly, and this fruitless search for this one person would cause delay. Jesus was intent on His mission to find this person anyway; He essentially ignored the disciples and kept looking around (Mark 5:32). Jesus knew that this person's faith could only be sincere if they were willing to confess before others their belief in His healing (Matthew 10:32–33). Their testimony would also give the crowd the opportunity to witness this amazing miracle. Likewise, today, God does not save people then cast them off. He pursues us for a continuing relationship with Him after our salvation, using our testimony to impact others.

## The Desperate Woman Faced Jesus and Found Salvation (5:33–34)

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In response to Jesus' question, the desperate woman identified herself (Mark 5:33). *Why?* She knew that her healing was real. She had already felt the change in her own body, so she responded to Jesus' search for her by falling at His feet. *How did she come forward?* Just as Jairus approached Jesus (cf. Mark 5:22), she prostrated herself before Jesus' feet in a posture of humility and worship. She approached with fear and trembling, possibly because she expected a rebuke for delaying Jesus on His mission, or maybe because she was emotionally overcome with the enormity of her relief. "Fear and trembling" were a common combination throughout the Old Testament when someone encountered God (Exodus 20:18; Job 4:14; Isaiah 19:1; Acts 7:32). Perhaps the desperate woman was simply awed at being in God's Presence. *What did she come forward to do?* She "told him the whole truth." Despite her fear, she admitted everything to Jesus—all she had suffered, what she had been thinking, why she touched Jesus' cloak. The fact that we know these details today is evidence that she recounted these thoughts and experiences to Jesus and His disciples.

Upon hearing her account, Jesus clarified the miracle, blessed her, and confirmed her healing (Mark 5:34). Jesus spoke tenderly to the woman calling her "Daughter;" it is the only time Jesus used this address in any of the Gospel narratives. He explained that she was healed not because she touched Him but because she believed in His ability to heal. Jesus needed her to know that her healing was not because she touched His magic clothes. Rath-

er, she was changed by the power of the Person she touched, and it happened because she desperately grasped for His healing. Jesus affirmed that Old Testament truth about God—that those who seek Him with all their heart will find Him (Jeremiah 29:13).

## **Having a Desperate Faith**

How to have faith that leads to healing like the desperate woman:

- Recognize how your suffering makes you dependent on God. Lean into your need for Him.
- Remember that you have expended all your other options. Remind yourself how your own solutions to this problem did not help but rather made things worse.
- Believe that God will radically intervene. Be intentional and ask Him for what you need. Ask with all your heart and soul.
- Surrender fully to whatever God asks of you no matter the risks.
- Don't be afraid to share your story of healing.

Jesus blessed the desperate woman with the typical Hebrew farewell, *Shalom*. “Go in peace.” He pronounced God’s peace through the wholeness that comes from a right relationship with God. Her ritual uncleanness would no longer separate her from God. As she believed when she first touched Jesus (Mark 5:29), Jesus told her to “be freed from [her] suffering.” Jesus affirmed His intent for her to be healed and encouraged her to continue to live in that freedom, healing, and salvation. His final words

to her were not a suggestion but a command: “Be freed.” Not a happenstance but a conscious choice of faith: “Be freed.” Not a momentary blip but a continual abiding: “Be freed.”

## **Implications and Actions**

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This woman’s testimony shows us the power of a desperate faith. A desperate faith receives Jesus’ healing. Like the desperate woman, we experience suffering as a fact of life. But hearing about what Jesus can do gives us hope, if we believe that His healing can be ours too. We must reach for it; casual, incidental contact with Jesus is not enough. Yet if we reach for Him, He is faithful and will free us from our suffering one way or another (1 Thesalonians 5:24). Through His healing, we find that suffering has made us stronger by teaching us to depend on Him. At the end of the day, the only question left is “Am I desperate enough to reach for Jesus?”

## **Questions**

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1. When was the last time you were desperate for something? What was it and what did you do to get it?

2. What comes to mind when you hear the word “suffering”? How have you experienced suffering in your life? How have these experiences shaped your faith in God?
  
3. Why do you think Jesus sought out the woman after He felt His power leave Him? When you think about your own experiences of suffering, what has been the result of talking about what God has done for you in these times?
  
4. How do you think the desperate woman’s story would have been different if she casually happened to touch Jesus as opposed to her desperately grasp of the edge of His cloak?
  
5. What risks hold you back from being desperate for Jesus?



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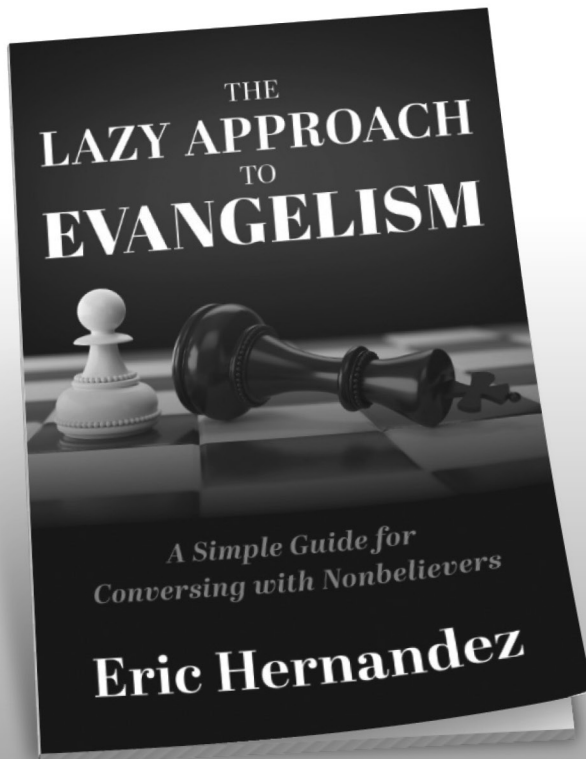


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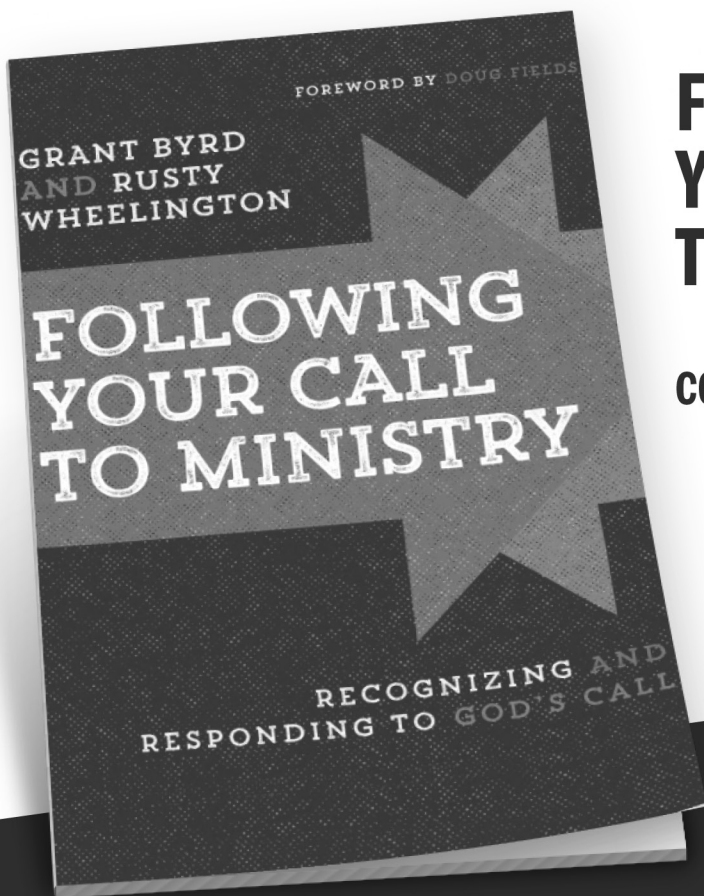


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# ***The Lazy Approach to Evangelism: A Simple Guide for Conversing with Nonbelievers***



Unfortunately, the biblical command of apologetics in evangelism is often neglected and misunderstood within our churches today. As a result, the church has become a largely irrelevant, ignorable institution within the public sphere of ideas. We must learn how to have effective gospel conversations within this culture of doubt. Evangelism doesn't have to be intimidating or difficult. That is the aim of this book. To equip you with the tools necessary for initiating and navigating fruitful conversations with nonbelievers in a secular society.



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When we receive a call from a friend, it is an invitation to have a conversation. The tone of such conversations can vary from humorous to serious, but regardless of the topic discussed, our enjoyment of the conversation is grounded in the relationship we have with our friend. It is the same in our conversations with God.

We can talk with Him about anything because of the relationship we have with Him through Jesus. We know God loves us, and we can trust His plan for our lives (Jeremiah 29:11). Perhaps you are sensing God inviting you into a conversation about serving Him in ministry. This book will encourage you and answer some of your questions about recognizing and responding to the call of God in your life. Its purpose is to help you pursue God's call and to guide your search through prayer, Bible study, and reflection.

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# lesson 8



## No Place Like Home

### MAIN IDEA

We Honor God with our faith and obedience.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Is my faith dead, or alive?

### STUDY AIM

To understand that faith is our greatest asset and unbelief is our greatest liability

### QUICK READ

The people of Nazareth had a dead faith. They doubted Jesus was the Son of God, and there were very few miracles performed there.

## Introduction

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Have you ever considered the health of your faith? That seems like a strange question to ask someone reading a study over the gospel of Mark, but it is an important question. Sometimes we get accustomed to going through our daily life and the habits that we have formed, the routine if you will, that sometimes our faith health is stagnant or declining.

Our faith is our greatest asset, so we must be intentional to ensure that we remain in a position of healthy faith. When we find ourselves slipping into the pit of unbelief, we will also discover that we are distancing ourselves from receiving the blessings that God so desires to lavish on us. As we go through this section of the Gospel, ask yourself a simple question: is my faith dead, or alive?

### Mark 6:1–6

<sup>1</sup> Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. <sup>2</sup> When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.

“Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What’s this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? <sup>3</sup> Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.

<sup>4</sup> Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home.” <sup>5</sup> He could not do any miracles there, except lay his

hands on a few sick people and heal them. <sup>6</sup>He was amazed at their lack of faith.

## **Jesus in His Hometown (6:1)**

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Jesus and His disciples had been traveling around the Sea of Galilee, teaching and performing miraculous healings. On the Eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus had freed a demon possessed man. On the West side of the sea, he had healed a man paralyzed since birth, healed a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years, and even raised Jairus' daughter from the dead. There is

### **The Town of Nazareth**

Nazareth was a basin town surrounded by hills 35 miles west of the Sea of Galilee in the hills to the north of the Jezreel Valley. It was hard to access and there is no mention of Nazareth in the Old Testament. It was a small, off the beaten path, town like many small towns in America today. The kind of town where everyone knows everyone.

The Bible tells us how most people thought of the town in the words of Nathanael, "Nazareth, Can anything good come from there?" (John 1:46).

Using archeology, geography, and Scripture, we learn that the hometown of Jesus is unremarkable. It was a town of low esteem. There is nothing noble about it. Looking back at Scripture tells us that Jesus would be despised and held in low esteem (Isaiah 53:3). There seems to be no better hometown for our Savior than the one chosen by God.



no doubt that word regarding Jesus had spread all around the region.

In this passage, Jesus and His disciples entered Nazareth, the hometown of Jesus.

## **Jesus' Teaching in the Synagogue (6:2)**

---

I always find it interesting when people claim there is no need to go to church because they study the Bible by themselves. Some people even make the claim that there were no churches in Jesus' day. Well, there was something in Jesus' day and it was called the synagogue.

Luke 4:16 (NASB) also captures this event, "And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read."

This lets us know that Jesus just did what He always did: Jesus went to church. This was what Jesus normally did, it was His custom. This also brings up a very important truth: if you are a follower of Christ, then you are to live as Jesus lived (1 John 2:6), and "as was His custom," spend the Lord's Day in the Lord's House that we call church.

On that day, Jesus entered the synagogue, as was His custom, and stood to read.

The question here begs to be asked: why was Jesus given the opportunity to read? A person could not just walk up and choose to read. You had to be recognized as a Rabbi. So clearly, in Jesus' hometown, He was recognized as someone who was in their official capacity.

This is huge because it tells us something about Jesus. While His public ministry was just beginning, Jesus' usual practice of engaging with God, God's Word, and God's people had always been a regular pattern in His life.

Jesus began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard Him were amazed. They were amazed at His wisdom. They were amazed at the "remarkable" miracles He had been performing.

### **Familiarity Clouds the Minds (6:3)**

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Have you ever thought you knew someone, and later find out that you only knew about someone? There is that old saying: you think you know someone. Meaning that you think you know a person, but there was more than you knew. Sometimes our familiarity with a person or situation can blind us.

The people were amazed by Jesus, but there was a problem. The problem of perceived familiarity. The people thought they knew Jesus. After all, this was Jesus' hometown. These are the people that watched Jesus grow up. They knew Jesus as the carpenter's son. They knew Mary, His mother. They watched Jesus grow up with His brothers James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon. They knew Jesus' sisters, who were apparently sitting in the synagogue. Since they knew all these things, then surely, they knew Jesus, and they could not get past what they thought they knew.

The result of their inability to get past what they thought they knew: they were offended by Him. This is often the case when we cannot process new information that does not agree with the old information. This inability can cause our minds to harden and rejection to occur. Rejection is exactly what happened.

The people of Nazareth were offended, and ultimately rejected Jesus. Why? Because they grew up with Jesus. They were from where Jesus was from. They knew His family. They knew what they knew, which ultimately blinded them to the truth.

## **A Prophet Without Honor (6:4)**

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One of the questions that I always ask myself when reading the Bible is, “what is Jesus telling me about Himself”? When Jesus spoke here, it was a meaning that both touches the current situation, as well as a grander statement regarding all of Israel.

Jesus had been traveling all over the region, teaching and performing miracles. He was being accepted and praised everywhere. The disciples had been witnesses to this excitement and acceptance. This changed in the hometown of Jesus.

Imagine being one of the disciples and witnessing the dramatic change in the attitudes of the people. Just prior to coming into Nazareth, the disciples had witnessed the power of Jesus and were pressing through crowds who just wanted to be close to Jesus because they desired His presence. In the town where Jesus was raised, the people were rejecting Him. This is a lesson that Jesus will build on in the future.

It also stretches further than the immediate situation. Jesus’ words speak to the wider rejection that will come: the rejection that will happen among His own nation, Israel, and His own family, the people of Israel. This is a glimpse of the future invitation that will be extended to the Gentiles, to hear the message and receive the Word of God.

## **Without Faith There Are No Blessings (6:5)**

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Upon first reading the words that Jesus could do no miracles, it can seem confusing. Is it saying that Jesus was not physically or spiritually able to do any miracles, because of their lack of faith? Is it similar to how Tinkerbell says she cannot do magic without Peter believing? Absolutely not. We must be very careful not to let our minds confuse fairy tales with the truth of the Gospel.

Jesus did do miracles in Nazareth, just not to the extent that He had performed miracles in other places. Jesus did “lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them,” which is a miracle. So, what are we learning? Jesus did not do many miracles there “because of their lack of faith” (Matthew 13:58). The Word of God teaches us that without faith there will be no reward (Hebrews 11:6). This means that without faith, there will be no blessings, no miracles.

### **Faith Thermometer**

Check your Faith Temperature, are you:

- Spending time every day with the Lord in prayer?
- Do you read the Word of God daily?
- Do you trust God with what He has given you?
- Are you tithing?
- Do you attend weekly church services, including Sunday school?
- Are you actively serving in your local church?

Sometimes we want to give up when it seems like all odds are against us. But Jesus did not give up on Nazareth, even though the people rejected Him. Despite their rejection, Jesus planted seeds of faith by reaching His hand toward the sick. This is Jesus' way. He extends His hand to those who are sick, and in meeting that need, plants the seed of faith.

## **Dead Faith (6:6)**

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This is one of the most heartbreaking verses in Scripture. It is sad to think that Jesus would be amazed because the city that He was from, rejected the Messiah that they had longed for. This no doubt would become a pivotal moment in the minds of the disciples, as they realized the desperate situation and grasped the need to get the message about Jesus as far as possible, with urgency.

In the city of Nazareth, the people of God, the Israelites, rejected the Messiah; and yet it was not long before when a gentile demonstrated faith that amazed Jesus. Talk about two opposite stories. Here in Nazareth, the Israelites *amazed* Jesus by their lack of faith; and in Capernaum a Roman centurion, a Gentile, *amazed* Jesus by his faith. In fact, Jesus said that He “[had] not found such great faith even in Israel” (Luke 7:9).

The people of Nazareth had dead faith. They were supposed to be the people longing for the Messiah, yet they did not have the faith to see the Messiah standing in their midst. It is hard to imagine the deep sadness that Jesus must have felt when He experienced the dead faith of His hometown.

## Implications and Actions

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We all have some preconceptions about God based on how we were raised, be it in church or not. The people of Nazareth had preconceptions about Jesus because of what they thought they knew, and as such could not accept anything that went against these thoughts. As followers of Christ, it is essential that we take what we think we know and align it with the Word of God. This can only occur through regular time spent in prayer and the Word of God.

## Questions

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1. Do you make it a priority to attend church? Why or why not?
  
2. Reflecting on the people of Nazareth, have you ever found yourself in a similar situation; one where you thought you knew someone, but later found out there was much you did not know?

3. Have you read something in the Bible and had to change what you previously believed to line up with your new knowledge?
  
4. What do you think the disciples were thinking while experiencing the rejection of Jesus in His hometown?
  
5. Reflecting on the contrast between Jesus' reception by the Roman Centurion and the people of Nazareth, do you think the disciples would understand the urgency to spread Good News about Jesus?

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# lesson 9



# Shake Off the Dust!

## MAIN IDEA

Too many people are slaves to their past mistakes.

## QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Have I moved on after experiencing failure?

## STUDY AIM

To understand that when you forgive others, it is a gift of grace to them, and a gift of grace to yourself

## QUICK READ

Jesus' approach to ministry was simple. Go and tell the Good News, pack light for the journey, and shake off the dust and move on after experiencing failure.

## Introduction

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After being rejected in Nazareth, Jesus pressed on. He did not let the rejection become a stumbling block or anchor to hold Him down. Instead, He, “went around teaching from village to village” (Mark 6:6). Jesus invited His disciples to follow Him, to watch Him, to do life with Him, experiencing all that He would experience, the good and the bad.

Now it was time for the disciples to learn through experience. Jesus gathered the disciples and sent them out, in pairs, to be an extension of His own ministry. There was no guarantee as to what would come of their journey, but they were instructed specifically with what to take and what to do. The disciples would learn to keep ministry simple, to be obedient, and to shake off the dust of failure and keep pressing on, because there was much to do and little time.

### Mark 6:7–13

<sup>7</sup>Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits.

<sup>8</sup>These were his instructions: “Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. <sup>9</sup>Wear sandals but not an extra shirt. <sup>10</sup>Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. <sup>11</sup>And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”

<sup>12</sup> They went out and preached that people should repent. <sup>13</sup> They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

## **Going in Pairs (6:7)**

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Have you ever heard that old saying, “teamwork makes the dream work”? It is cheesy, but it is true. Being able to share the load of work is a blessing. This is especially true when going into a difficult assignment or working in unfamiliar territory. Missionaries often express the thing they miss most when working on foreign soil is a familiar accent.

### **What Is an Apostle?**

The Greek verb *apostello* means to “send out.” The sense is to send away toward a designated goal or purpose. If this word looks familiar, it is because this word is used for the term apostle. The disciples were dedicated learners, or students. An apostle is given the authority of the sender. This account is the first time Jesus sends His disciples. The requirements for someone to be given the title of apostle is that they had to have been with Jesus during His ministry, had personally witnessed Jesus after the resurrection, and had been empowered by the Holy Spirit to perform signs and miracles. The only exception to this was Paul, who did not accompany Jesus during His earthly ministry; but to whom Jesus did make a special appearance and calling, as found in Acts 26.

Jesus gathered the disciples together and gave them assignments, in pairs. Going in pairs provides the benefit of encouragement in the face of hard times and provides a better return for the labor (Ecclesiastes 4:9–10). The Bible also teaches a repeated theme that two witnesses were needed to prove that a subject is truth. Since the disciples were being sent to provide testimony and preach the message of repentance, it was important that there be two to accommodate Jewish law.

Jesus sent the disciples out, two by two, with authority over impure spirits. Authority is important, because it is the power, or right, to give orders or make decisions. Jesus had to bestow this authority upon the disciples so they could begin a ministry that would mirror Jesus' own. One where healing could occur, and impure spirits could be cast out. These were signs that commonly were accepted among the Jewish people as confirmation that a messenger was sent by God.

## **Obey and Pack Light (6:8–9)**

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Can you imagine taking a journey with just the clothes on your back? No additional clothing, no shower supplies, no phone, and no money. This is exactly what Jesus called the disciples to do.

Jesus told the disciples to take their staff and wear their sandals, but leave everything else, including money, behind. Perhaps this reads slightly familiar. In the Old Testament, God commanded the Israelites to eat their Passover meal with, “your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand” (Exodus 12:11). The disciples were embarking on an exodus of sort. They were leaving their former lives and professions behind and being sent out

into their new calling. The sandals would protect their feet for the journey, and the staff was used as an assistive device for walking.

This shows Jesus' simple approach to ministry: obey and pack light. Jesus does not want us bogged down with concerns over clothes or food, or any other need we think we have. He was teaching the valuable lesson we all need, "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you" (Matthew 6:33). Our Father knows all that we need, and He will provide. We must learn to trust and obey.

## **Do Life With the People (6:10)**

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We live in a culture that is always moving to the bigger and better. Advertisements are designed to drive us to always desire something better than we have, which in turn means we should work more, make more, and spend more. That is not what Jesus teaches.

Jesus told the disciples to enter a town, and the first place that welcomed them was where they were to stay until they left the town. This is a lesson on contentment. Learning to be happy where you are placed, and with what God has blessed upon you is not an easy lesson for everyone to learn. This lesson becomes easier when we have our minds focused on what is important.

The mission was the focus, not comforts. When an inviting door was extended, there was also a blessing extended. The disciple was blessed with a welcoming home, and the homeowner was blessed with a desired guest. We would be wise to remember that we can steal someone's blessing if we reject an invitation because something does not live up to a set standard.

This time spent with the families would also provide an opportunity for the family to see authenticity. An act can be kept up while someone is well rested, but with exhaustion comes truth. Masks come off, guards come down, and the real connection can occur. People today long for authentic connection that only comes from doing life with the people we serve. When we are willing to be around the people we are serving, it allows them to see into our lives, and that we have nothing to hide. For new believers, it is an opportunity to experience Jesus through the life of a believer, which in turn allows them to have someone they can imitate as you imitate Jesus.

## **Shake Off the Dust (6:11)**

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I remember when our church tried a new evangelism tool. We had printed out business cards with our church's information on it, and a link that a person could go to and have a variety of questions regarding our church and our faith answered. I remember being at the gas station when an opportunity to hand out our new card presented itself. I walked around the pump, handed the gentleman standing there a card and gave a simple introduction and explanation about the card, and invited him to visit the website. I felt amazing. Then the man took the card, threw it in the back seat of his car, and completely rejected the invitation.

We should expect rejection. Jesus experienced rejection in His hometown of Nazareth. The important part is what we do after the rejection. We can either hold onto it, or we can forget what is behind and strive to what is ahead (Philippians 3:13–15). Far too often people allow themselves to become slaves to their past

rejections, failures, and mistakes. This is not what we are called to do. We are called to press on.

### **Celebrate Little Victories**

Jesus only tells the Disciples to shake the dust off when they are rejected. He does not want us to carry the negative with us. It is okay to carry the victories but leave the rest behind. Any time you feel a struggle with a past failure coming back, reflect on the times that were successful. Celebrate the little victories.

This is especially true of our work with the Gospel. Jesus told the disciples to “shake off the dust” and move on after experiencing a failure. Go back and notice the words in the verse. He said, “shake the dust off your feet.” Yes, that failure is going to “get on you,” but do not let it stay there. Shake it off and press on.

### **An Extension of Jesus’ Ministry (6:12–13)**

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I worked with a church plant in its early days. We met in parks but dreamed of having a building. One day I felt an urge to stop by a building that had just gone up for rent. After meeting with the owner, we were amazed to discover that he had prayed a church would want that building. Our paths were guided together by our amazing Father in Heaven. There was still a problem: we had a building, but no chairs and less money. Shortly after signing the lease, a church halfway across America reached out and wanted

to help us financially. They provided the financial ability for us to purchase the exact number of chairs for which we had prayed.

When we step out in obedience, there will be blessings. God does not need us to be perfect or ready for the ministry (no one ever really is), He just wants us to trust and obey.

The disciples trusted and obeyed Jesus, and the results of their short-term mission trips were repentance of sins and healing. Their mission was an extension of the ministry of Jesus. This is the same ministry that we are now a part of, an extension of the same work.

## **Implications and Actions**

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Jesus' approach to ministry was simple: go tell the Good News, pack light, and shake off the dust after experiencing failures. We need to remember that we do not need to complicate what we are called to do by focusing on the things that do not matter. Keep the main thing the main thing: people need to hear about Jesus. Don't let the little things like supplies and finances be a distraction, God will provide all that is needed.

Sometimes we desperately want to reach someone, and we exhaust ourselves trying to reach them. Jesus told the disciples that if a town, a people, do not receive you, shake it off and move on. There are other people that need to hear the Gospel, and if we stay with those who do not receive the Word, then those who are ready to hear will never be given the opportunity. This does not mean you give up on them, but you move on and circle back later. There is much to do, and little time. We must move with urgency.



## Questions

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1. Have you ever been in a difficult situation, and been grateful to have had a helper with you? What about that situation made it difficult, and why was the helper such a blessing?
2. What is keeping you from stepping out in faithful obedience, and serving Jesus?
3. Can you recall a time when you had the opportunity to “do life” with a fellow believer? What was the outcome of doing life together?
4. Reflecting on the teaching to shake off the dust, are you holding on to past failures? If so, how can you break the chains that make you a slave to your past?

5. Despite not being fully prepared for ministry the disciples obeyed and went where Jesus commanded. If called today, would you be willing to do the same?

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# lesson 10



## What's Worth Dying For?

### MAIN IDEA

A guilty conscience is a cruel companion.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Would I be willing to die for my faith? And more practically, would I be willing to LIVE for my faith seven days a week?

### STUDY AIM

To understand that as believers there are things such as faith, freedom, and family that are worth dying for

### QUICK READ

John stood for the truth of his faith, and, as a result, he ended up dying for his faith.

## Introduction

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When you read the word *sacrifice* what comes to mind? As a veteran I think of service members in a combat zone. When service members are asked why they fight so hard a common answer is that they are fighting for those back home. They want to keep their families free from the things occurring wherever they are serving. Another answer is that they are fighting for the person standing beside them. The person serving alongside is not just a “battle buddy,” but also a motivational factor. When the combination of the two have the commitment that what they are fighting for is worth it, then they will fight together to the end; sometimes even making the ultimate sacrifice, because it is about the person next to you (John 15:13). Perhaps you have heard the question: are you willing to die for what you believe? There are things worth dying for: faith, freedom, and family.

Jesus had just warned the disciples that the gospel would not always be welcomed. The disciples had witnessed Jesus being rejected in His hometown. They had been commissioned by Jesus to travel in pairs to spread the message and warned that there may be rejection along their journey. The lesson they would soon learn—following the Lord may lead to death. When faced with the question of whether you would die for what you believe, a better question to ask yourself is this: am I willing to LIVE out my faith seven days a week?

### **Mark 6:14–29**

<sup>14</sup>King Herod heard about this, for Jesus’ name had become well known. Some were saying, “John the Baptist has been

raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him."

<sup>15</sup> Others said, "He is Elijah." And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago."

<sup>16</sup> But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!"

<sup>17</sup> For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. <sup>18</sup> For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." <sup>19</sup> So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, <sup>20</sup> because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

<sup>21</sup> Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. <sup>22</sup> When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you." <sup>23</sup> And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom."

<sup>24</sup> She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" "The head of John the Baptist," she answered.

<sup>25</sup> At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: "I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

<sup>26</sup> The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. <sup>27</sup> So he

immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, <sup>28</sup> and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. <sup>29</sup> On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

## **A Familiar Message (6:14–16)**

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When you do the work of the Father, the world takes notice. Sometimes you will encounter people, even loved ones, who will reject you. Other times you will travel with very little, the Father's providence will provide, and you will be received by total strangers. Still, other times, people will be intrigued by your word, seem to understand that it is of divine origin, and then attempt to silence you. The reality is that the Word of God is sharp, and it cuts. Even when the message is understood, people can be so caught up in their worldliness that they will do whatever is necessary to maintain the "status quo."

Herod began to hear a new name: Jesus. This Jesus was preaching a message that was familiar, and He was also performing miracles. This new commotion brought a new realization into the life of "King" Herod: a guilty conscience is a cruel companion. Reading through the verses tells us that Herod struggled to align the message with the man. While people were wondering if this Jesus was a prophet from long ago, or even the great prophet Elijah, Herod was convinced that God had somehow raised John the Baptizer from the dead; the same John whom Herod had beheaded.

## King Herod

King Herod was not a king at all. He was Herod Antipas, also known as Herod the Tetrarch, and was the son of Herod the Great. The word Tetrarch was a Roman term meaning "ruler of a quarter," as Rome gave him one-quarter of his father's rule. He was a first century ruler of Galilee and Perea. Following the death of His father in 4 BC, Caesar Augustus assigned Herod to rule the Galilean client state of the Roman Empire, which he did until AD 39. Herod divorced his first wife in favor of Herodias, who was married to Herod's half-brother Philip.

"King" Herod ruled throughout Jesus' earthly ministry. After Jesus was arrested, Pilate sent Him to Herod Antipas, as Jesus was a Galilean. Herod was excited to meet Jesus and hoped that Jesus would perform a sign of some sort. After Jesus refused to appease the "king," Herod dressed Jesus in an elegant robe and sent Him back to Pilate.

Herod Antipas would spend the last part of his life living in exile in Gaul, along with Herodias, for speaking out against Caesar Agrippa I.

## A Man Torn Between Two Worlds (6:17–20)

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John the Baptizer had been preaching a simple message: repent and turn back to God. He also was not afraid to speak the Word of God, regardless of the audience or the topic. John even called the religious leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, a brood of vipers (Matthew 3:7). If there was ever a man who knew that his faith

was worth dying for, it was John the Baptizer. This is why Jesus spoke so highly of John, saying, “among those born of women there is no one greater than John” (Luke 7:28).

Herod arrested John to silence him. Why? Because Herod married his brother’s wife, Herodias. A marriage that went against the Word of God (Leviticus 18:16; 20:21) and was publicly condemned by John (Matthew 14:4). Herodias had nursed a grudge against John, and for the sake of appeasing his wife, Herod had John locked in chains, but Herod would protect John as much as possible.

It seems strange that Herod would enjoy listening to a man whom he had imprisoned. We get a picture of a man torn between two worlds. On one hand there was Herod, ruler of a quarter, a man who needed to maintain an image of power and public respect by any means necessary, and who desired to extend his political reign. On the other hand, there was a man who seemed to know that John was a righteous and holy man, that the message was from God, and was, therefore, intrigued and puzzled to hear; but he did not receive the message.

## **The Company Kept (6:21–23)**

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We need to remember that the company we keep speaks volumes of our character and can also get us into situations we otherwise would have avoided, which could be our own undoing. While you may have your dreams and plans, the people around you also have their plans, or schemes, and may be willing to go to extreme measures to ensure theirs is the one that ends on top.



Herodias schemed to get the treachery that she desired. She had long “nursed a grudge against John” and when the opportunity arose, she seized the opportunity. Herod, who had been protecting John, knowing John was a righteous and holy man, was now forced to do the one thing he had been avoiding.

Herod’s decision to throw a birthday party in honor of himself and the events that unfolded may be a familiar read. Going back to the story of Esther we find a similar account. A royal birthday party, a beautiful young woman, an ambassador of the Lord, a villain scheming for treachery, and a promise of a gift.

## **Polar Opposites (6:24–29)**

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The young can be easily manipulated by the old. This is a truth that has stood the test of time. Young people look to older people for wisdom and advice. The Bible tells us that we are to be examples for those younger than us. We have a choice to make, stand for the faith that we have or lead people astray by our cowardice to do so. There is a clear option for those who claim Jesus as Savior and Lord.

The daughter of Herodias pleased the king with her dance, and she rushed to ask mother what she should seek as her gift. In a selfish decision that removed any gain for her daughter, Herodias moved and her scheme to permanently silence John was accomplished.

Herod, though knowing John was a righteous and holy man, was too cowardly and weak to refuse such a request; fearing that it would upset his worldly position. This shows a stark contrast between two people in this account between Herod and John.

Herod was afraid to admit that he believed John, and that John was clearly a man of God. John, a righteous and holy man of God, was fearless in the face of adversity and kept proclaiming the Word of the Lord until it was no longer possible to do so.

The life of the Baptizer ends in the humblest way. After his death, John's disciples came and laid his body in a tomb. It was a simple burial for a man who had gone to be with the Lord in glory.

### **How to LIVE by Faith**

You can help your daily walk with the Lord by committing to spending the first part of your day with God. This does not mean a Bible study. Instead, think of it like a young child crawling up in the arms of their dad after waking in the morning. This is how we should come to the Father. Spend just a few moments every morning speaking with your father (prayer) and read His Word. It does not take long, but your faith walk will grow because of it.

### **Implications and Actions**

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A man reaps what he sows (Galatians 6:7). John spent his life urgently sowing the message given to him by the Father. He did this, not seeking to die for the Lord, but to live his life in service to the Lord. He understood that his message was one of urgency because he was preparing the way for the Messiah. This is the same life we should strive to live, a life living for God spreading His message with urgency. Why urgency? Because we do not

know the hour when Jesus will return, but we know the message that we must spread.

When you make the decision to serve the True King and spread His message, the kings of this world may raise their hands against you. John stood for the truth of his faith, and, as a result, he ended up dying for his faith. We must echo the words of John the Baptizer: “He [Jesus] must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:30). This is a message repeated throughout the Word of God. Luke 7:28, tells us that we are not to think highly of ourselves, but to care more about the kingdom of God. When our mindset is right, there is no desire for any glory. When we reach that point of selfless service to our Lord, then, by Jesus’ own words: “yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he” (John the Baptist).

## Questions

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1. Have you ever been torn between the two worlds of the Gospel Message? If so, what made you go from hearing the message, to receiving it?
  
2. Have you ever had to change the company you keep so you could better live by faith? What was that experience like?

3. How do you live your faith every day?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. What are some steps you can start today that will help better live by faith?

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# lesson 11



# More Than Enough

## MAIN IDEA

Never measure a problem considering your own resources, because a little can become much in the hands of Jesus.

## QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Do I really believe that where God guides, He provides?

## STUDY AIM

To understand that God will create a need in your life to demonstrate that He can meet it

## QUICK READ

Here's what Jesus does when you surrender everything you have and are to Him. He blesses what you give Him, He multiplies what you give Him, and then He gives it back to you attached with His power in it.

## Introduction

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It can be hard to find the time to rest and get filled up before jumping in and serving others. We spend our day busy with various activities of life, when suddenly, a need arises. A friend is in the hospital, a neighbor asks us to watch their children so they can deal with a crisis, a coworker or classmate needs help with a project—opportunities to compassionately care for others do not wait for our readiness.

In the Scripture for this lesson, we find a very well-known story from Jesus' busy life and ministry, the story of the feeding of the five thousand. The previous verses in chapter six relate several life-altering changes that must have been hard on Jesus. His ministry was questioned by his hometown neighbors in Nazareth; his cousin, John the Baptist, was killed; and His disciples went out in their own ministry endeavors two-by-two.

Jesus was troubled as the crowd gathered along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. He sought rest and provision for Himself and His disciples, but the needs of so many lost and hurting people surpassed His own.

### Mark 6:30–44

<sup>30</sup> The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. <sup>31</sup> Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

<sup>32</sup> So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. <sup>33</sup> But many who saw them leaving recognized them

and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. <sup>34</sup> When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

<sup>35</sup> By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. <sup>36</sup> Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat."

<sup>37</sup> But he answered, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?"

<sup>38</sup> "How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see." When they found out, they said, "Five—and two fish."

<sup>39</sup> Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. <sup>40</sup> So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. <sup>41</sup> Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. <sup>42</sup> They all ate and were satisfied, <sup>43</sup> and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. <sup>44</sup> The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

## **We All Need Rest (6:30–34)**

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Other than the resurrection, the feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle Jesus performed that was reported in all four Gospels. It must have been a significant story for Jesus' disci-

ples to remember it so well. Although there are a few subtle differences in each account, the point is represented well. You may remember John's version of the story where a little boy offers his lunch to help feed the group, but in the other three Gospels it is up to the disciples to provide for the masses out of their own meager resources.

## **Why Are the Four Gospels So Different?**

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all tell the story or gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet each one has a different take on what happened. If you've ever been in a car wreck you will know that not everyone who witnessed the accident had the same story because of their vantage point. Similarly, those who told Jesus' story had different vantage points. It is important for us to keep this in mind when reading each gospel account. We should be careful not to read into the story what was told by another witness. We should ask, why is this story different? What makes this particular vantage point unique? What is the author's purpose in including this detail? If you would like more information on these differences, you might consider buying a Bible commentary set or visiting a local library or Christian university library. Be sure and use accredited, trustworthy resources when researching biblical interpretation.

Upon returning from their mission trip around Galilee, these now apostles, which translates as "sent ones" from the Greek, must have been worn out but excited about all the things God



had done through them. Their mission trip was so successful that people started to follow them, just like they followed Jesus. For many of these people, this was the first time any religious leader showed them compassion. Out in their small towns and villages nothing happened that concerned the priests or teachers of the law. Not like in Jerusalem where the Temple stood, the ministers mingled in the marketplace.

But now, some willingly went out to heal the broken, cast out demons, and preach that all can repent. Jesus knew the cost that ministry has on the heart and mind. He knew these sent ones needed rest, because ministry is taxing. Yet Scripture tells us, the people kept “coming and going” so they could not even eat lunch.

I once went on a mission trip to a Caribbean island. I must admit that I felt a bit guilty about serving in such a beautiful place, but the need was great. A hurricane had destroyed most of the homes of the local population. I spent every moment endlessly working until finally the mission team leader said, “Let’s go to the beach today.” I refused stating something about the need is too great to stop. She gently reminded me that it is important to slow down and rest in the beauty of all that God has provided for these people.

Jesus decided to take the apostles to a more remote place, a quiet place to rest. Three times this same word is used in the text, but the NIV translates it differently each time. It is a “quiet place” (6:31), a “solitary place” (6:32), and a “remote place” (6:35). Interestingly, this same Greek word is used earlier in the Gospel to describe the place where Jesus was tested by Satan, the “wilderness” (1:12–13).

We all need a time and place to rest. It is in these solitary, remote places that God meets us, provides for us, but it can also be a place of testing. For it is in the wilderness, in these quiet places, that we learn to depend solely upon the Lord.

Jesus knows how easy it is to get caught up in all the amazing things God is doing. Participating in kingdom business can be exhilarating. But before we know it, we are spent, empty, struggling to serve out of our own strength and ability rather than the power of God. We think, “I just need to help this one person and then I will rest and refill.” But when needs keep “coming and going,” it’s hard to stop and rest.

## **Jesus Saw the Need (6:34–38)**

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Jesus knew the importance of rest and time spent with the Father, but as the crowd grew, He saw the need of people yearning to know more about the things of God. Jesus had compassion on them, for “they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

King Herod, the governing authority of the day, could have cared for and shepherded the people. But, as we read in the preceding verses, he was busy hosting a magnificent banquet for the military leaders and the important men from Galilee in his banquet hall with all the regalia he could muster. The religious leaders could have cared for and shepherded the people. But they were the important men at Herod’s banquet, rather than out in these remote places with ordinary, common people.

As important as it was to help the apostles rest, Jesus was overcome with compassion for the crowd. And in that remote place, He taught them all the things of God. Jesus hosted a ban-

quet, not in a regal dining hall like King Herod's banquet, but on a grassy hillside beside the Sea of Galilee. Yet to host a banquet, resources are required. Jesus invited His disciples to join in this ministry of compassion.

Notice in verse 35, that the one-time "apostles" are now simply referred to as "his disciples," who grumbled about the impossible circumstances of ministering to the needs of others. Here in the remote wilderness, Jesus tested them. Just a few days earlier, they had witnessed God do impossible things through their ministry. They had healed the sick and cast out demons. They were not worried about what they would eat or where they would sleep. They relied completely upon God's provision. For Jesus had sent them out with the instructions, "Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts" (6:8).

### **We All Lead Someone**

Someone is always watching how we respond to certain situations or react to trouble that may come. In our response, we are giving testimony to what we believe and what we rely on for provision. Who are you ministering to?

- A little brother or older sister
- A friend at school
- A son or daughter
- A coworker
- A parent
- A Sunday School member

How quickly one can move from a ministry leader to a grumbling follower. We all get tired. Everyone who serves and ministers to the needs of others gets tired. Thankfully, Jesus is there to disciple us. He is there to teach us how to have compassion and how to serve with compassion, not depending on our own abilities but on the Father's provision.

The disciples rightly saw a need and compassionately wanted to care for the need, but they couldn't see a way to do it. Their own meager resources and abilities weren't enough. "Send the people away so that they can...buy themselves something to eat" (6:36). The disciples wanted Jesus to *send them* to find their own provisions. Jesus not only has the compassion to care for others, but He also trusts in God's provision to meet the need. And He invites His disciples to join Him in this opportunity.

Often, God creates a need in our life or in our circle of influence to demonstrate that He can meet that need. But we must rely on Him and His provision. For where God guides, He provides. He provides abundantly.

## **Jesus Invites Us to Experience the Father's Abundant Provision (6:39–44)**

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I live in West Texas where we know what green grass means. What a vivid picture of God's provision. Jesus invited his banquet guests to sit down on the "green grass." Not in a patch of goat head stickers or dry, yellow tumbleweeds like we have in West Texas but in the green grass.

A good shepherd knows where the good, green grass is. A good shepherd knows where God has provided rain, nourishing

the earth in His time. The Good Shepherd leads His sheep to sit down in green pastures, beside quiet waters, these quiet, remote places that refresh one's soul. And the sheep that trust the Good Shepherd sit down in the green grass joining in the banquet and are satisfied.

Most of the people who gathered in the green grass that day, had probably never been accepted or allowed at a banquet meal. They were certainly not invited to King Herod's palace. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, has compassion for those who have never felt accepted or provision. He doesn't fear the cost. He doesn't worry about the impossible needs. Jesus sees only the opportunity to show others a glimpse of this beautiful, welcoming kingdom of God.

We should never measure a problem by our own resources, but with God's abundant provision in mind. God can satisfy even in the most meager circumstances. When we rely on Him for all our needs to be met, He fills us to overflowing in order that others might benefit from our faithful reliance on Him.

Not only did thousands of people get enough to eat that day, but there were twelve baskets left over. Just enough for the disciples to have breakfast.

## **Implications and Actions**

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Even when we fail to grasp how abundant God's provision can be, Jesus doesn't give up on us. He invites us in to experience the Father's abundance, His unlimited resources and provision. And He sends us out to do His ministry and to serve others. Where God guides, He provides.

Caring for others takes a lot of hard work and resources but God's provision is more than enough to complete the task He places before us. Just like Jesus, when we look to others with compassion and love, God will provide in and through us all that is needed. He is sending you to join in this incredible experience and meet impossible needs, I hope you will join Him.

## Questions

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1. What impossible need has God placed in your life, in the life of one of your neighbors, or friends from school? How has God opened your eyes to such a need, and filled you with compassion?
2. Have you ever found yourself in a remote or desolate circumstance where it seemed impossible for God to guide you? What did God teach you in this time?
3. When have you been welcomed in to partake of a meal or had a need met by someone else?
4. When have you been miraculously satisfied with God's abundant provision?

# lesson 12

## Don't Be Afraid

### MAIN IDEA

Any problem over our heads is already under His feet.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What is fear?

### STUDY AIM

To understand that Jesus watches me and prays for me in my most difficult times

### QUICK READ

Jesus walked on water during severe weather but the most dangerous situation that night was not the weather but the fear raging in the minds of the disciples. Fear can be a powerful and destructive force.

## Introduction

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I could hardly believe my eyes. There on the cereal aisle in the grocery store was my teacher. I still remember how I felt, as a Kindergarten, seeing my teacher outside of school. She was wearing polka-dotted shorts, a t-shirt, pink flip-flops, and a sun-visor. She said something about being at the park for a picnic, but I thought she never left our school room. It was where she was every morning greeting her students as we arrived, it was where we left her at the end of the day, it was where she ate her lunch and, I assumed, where she slept at night.

But there she was, out of place. I just couldn't believe what I was seeing. Often in life we can get stuck, believing certain things and trusting in certain expectations. Even when we clearly see something quite different, we can struggle to let go of a certain belief. This must have been how the disciples felt when they saw a figure walking on water out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee.

In today's lesson we discover that even in times of great fear, Jesus sees us in our struggle to believe and draws us to trust Him in all circumstances. And when we recognize Jesus for who He truly is, we are able to give faithful testimony that He is the Son of God, who can command even the wind and waves.

### **Mark 6:45–53**

<sup>45</sup> Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. <sup>46</sup> After leaving them, he went up on a mountain-side to pray



<sup>47</sup> Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. <sup>48</sup> He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, <sup>49</sup> but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, <sup>50</sup> because they all saw him and were terrified.

Immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." <sup>51</sup> Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, <sup>52</sup> for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.

<sup>53</sup> When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there.

## **Stuck in Our Faith (6:45–48a)**

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The miraculous event of feeding over five thousand people with just a few loaves of bread and two small fish had caused quite a stir among the crowd. So much so, that following this miracle, Jesus "immediately" sent His disciples away while He dismissed the crowd. The crowds must have been spreading rumors about who this Man from Nazareth truly was. Some said He was Elijah or another prophet of old. Some may have said that He should be king in place of Herod. Others proclaimed Him to be the Messiah, the sent One from God. All this attention and fame must have affected Jesus, for He went off by Himself to pray.

The disciples found themselves alone as well, not in prayer, but struggling against rising waves. Scripture relates that all

night they struggled. We've all felt like the disciples. Up all night struggling with a situation or a certain person, wondering if God sees us in our distress.

The disciples knew who Jesus was, didn't they? The central question throughout the Gospel of Mark is: who is Jesus? Is He a king, a prophet, or the Son of God? He is obviously more than a shepherd, as He proved by miraculously multiplying fishes and loaves. Yet as His popularity rose and the rumors grew, the disciples struggled with what to believe about this man. Out in the middle of the water that night, they had a crisis of faith. Fear was rising.

My daughter has an unexplainable fear of the boardgame, Operation. Maybe you've played this game. Each player is allowed to take a turn performing surgery on a cardboard cutout of a man who suffers from several odd ailments. The goal is to fix the patient's ailments using a pair of tweezers without touching the sides of the injuries. If the sides are touched, a buzzer screams, and the patient's nose lights up red thus ending the turn.

For some reason, just the thought of this game produces panic in my daughter. Even into her teenage years, if a commercial for the game came on TV, she would leave the room. While shopping, she would refuse to go down the boardgame aisle. One night, when she was four years old, I decided to fix her fear. I sat her down on the living room floor and produced the source of her dread, hoping that she would see there is nothing to fear in this simple assembly of cardboard and plastic. She was having none of it. When she saw the game, she jumped up screaming and ran out the front door, into the dark night, still in her pajamas. I calmly walked to the door, hoping not to induce more fear, but she was

already out of sight. I could only hear her screams coming from more than a block away. I took off out the door, running as fast as I could toward her little screaming voice. Past our neighbors who were standing in their driveways wondering what atrocity was happening, ready to call 9-1-1.

I finally got close enough to see the little pink hearts on her pj's and tackled her just before she ran into a busy street. I scooped her up and reassured her that I would remove the game from our house and throw it in the dumpster. I told her not to fear. I would never make her play that game again. Twenty years later we still avoid the boardgame aisle when shopping.

Fear doesn't always make sense. Fear can cause us to see things that aren't there or do things we normally wouldn't do.

## **The Power of Fear (6:48b–50a)**

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As the disciples struggled to see and believe, shortly before dawn, a dark figure appeared amidst the tumultuous waves. That sleepless night they fought against the wind and waves. Heavy eyelids and aching backs must have convinced them they were hallucinating. They were out in the middle of the lake by this time. No one could have been out there alone, without a boat.

Jesus saw His disciples in their struggle and went out to them. It seems odd to me that Scripture tells us, "He was about to pass by them." Why would Jesus have passed by them if He saw them struggling? Was He going out further to show them the way to shore? Was He going to calm the wind and waves ahead of them to end their struggle? Was He going to show them who He truly was, as if walking on water wasn't enough?

Scripture doesn't tell us why Jesus was going to pass by them. Only that in their struggle, Jesus *saw* His disciples. But they didn't see him. They believed they saw a ghost. The appearance of Jesus that early morning on the lake, terrified His followers. They didn't recognize their Teacher.

Fear can cause us to doubt certain things in our lives. Fear can be a powerfully destructive wave that causes us to struggle, even with our own faith. Seeing does not always lead us to believing. For these men, their lack of faith, their disbelief, prevented them from seeing Jesus for who He is. What they saw instead, terrified them.

When we truly see Jesus for who He is, not for what we have made Him out to be, it can be terrifying. When we see Jesus for who He is, not according to the little box that we put Him in to keep our faith safe, but when we see Jesus for who He truly is, it can scare us. Because to truly see Jesus comes with a cost.

The gospel of Mark is most likely the earliest of the four Gospels to be written. It was written sometime around AD 60 to encourage the Christians in Rome who struggled with their own faith. This group of early believers faced intense persecution. Proclaiming Jesus as Lord had a tremendous cost. Tradition claims that the gospel of Mark is Peter's own story, told to a young man named John Mark while Peter was in prison. Soon after, Peter would be crucified for his proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah.

If the central question of the gospel of Mark is, who is Jesus, then the hero and the heroine of the story are those who give faithful witness to seeing Jesus for who He is. Even in times of struggle. Even when the winds and waves are rising. Even in hopeless circumstances, is Jesus your Living Hope?

## **Dietrich Bonhoeffer— The Cost of Discipleship and His Life**

In the early 1940's, a young Dietrich Bonhoeffer would leave the safety of New York City, where he had been studying, to return to Germany and stand against the Nazi regime. He spoke out very publicly, against the atrocities his own government was committing. He gave testimony as a faithful witness for Jesus Christ, yet he was arrested in 1943, and in 1945, Bonhoeffer was hanged as a conspirator.

Seeing Jesus for who He truly is, calls us to respond, and this is a struggle. Responding to who Jesus is has a cost. The cost of following Jesus could be to give up certain friends or even family. The cost of following Jesus could be our lifestyle, status, or job. The cost of following Jesus could be to give up our preferences or traditions. The cost of discipleship could be to give up our home to be a missionary in a different country or city. For many, proclaiming Jesus as Lord will cost their very life.

The cost of seeing Jesus as the one who has power and authority over the wind and the waves, as the Messiah, the Son of God, has a tremendous cost. If we see Him, will we proclaim Him as Lord of our lives? Or will we go on struggling with our faith, against the rising waves of fear and doubt?

### **Jesus Is the Bread of Life (6:50b–53)**

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Jesus heard the cry of His disciples and *immediately* called out to them. “Take courage! It is I.” He did not pass them by, instead, He

climbed into the boat. The wind and the waves died down. Their struggle ceased. In their fear and disbelief, Jesus had compassion for them.

You may remember Matthew's account of this story where Peter walks out onto the water to meet Jesus (Matthew 14:22–34). Oddly, Peter's role is not mentioned in Mark's Gospel. If this is Peter's own story as written by John Mark, why would Peter's involvement be left out? This question has baffled countless Bible scholars. It is possible that Peter wanted the spotlight to be on Jesus rather than himself.

### **I Am, A Divine Revelation Formula**

In the story of Moses and the burning bush, God said to Moses, tell the Israelites "I AM has sent me to you" (Exodus 3:14). Throughout Scripture, any time "I Am" is used we should pay attention because it likely points to a divine revelation. When Jesus says, "I Am" (*ἐγώ εἰμι* in Greek), He is claiming far more than a simple metaphor about bread or vines. Like in the miracles, "I Am" is another way Jesus helps His followers to see who He truly is. These divine revelations unveil Jesus' identity bringing peace in fearful times while glorifying the Father's presence and authority. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh who came to dwell amongst His people.

Mark gives the reader a look inside the minds of the disciples. In the verses preceding our text, the disciples had witnessed Jesus feeding over five thousand people with only a few loaves of bread and two small fish. Yet the disciples did not understand

what they had seen. “Their hearts were hardened,” their minds were already made up, regardless of what they saw. Their Christology (view of Christ) was based on the miracles performed, based on Jesus’ actions rather than His true identity. The disciples had not internalized who Jesus is, they only saw the miracles, leading them to make their own assumptions, like many in the crowd, about who this man was.

In the gospel of John, Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe” (John 6:35–36).

Sometimes we get stuck, struggling with fear as the waves of life crash around us. It is in this crisis of faith that our witness is truly tested. Jesus proclaimed that He is our daily provision. He is the Messiah. He is the Son of God. And as we go, we must give faithful testimony to this very Good News. We may not see Him clearly in every circumstance, but He was, and is, and will always be our Savior.

## **Implications and Actions**

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Seeing Jesus, out of place, walking out on water, terrified these men. They couldn’t believe what they saw. What about in your life? When Jesus does miraculous things, is your heart hardened? Have you already made up your mind about who Jesus is? Do you refuse to believe what you are seeing?

To truly see Jesus for who He is may have a tremendous cost for you. But the reward of Jesus’ daily provision in your life is far greater. Give faithful witness to all the miraculous things Jesus

has done in your own life, praise Him as Savior and Lord. He is the One that even the wind and waves bow before. Watch as He uses your story to help others see and believe.

## Questions

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1. Do you have any fears that don't make sense?
2. When was a time you struggled with your own faith? How did Jesus help you?
3. What are some other "I AM" statements in the Bible and how do they help you see Jesus as He truly is?
4. What has seeing and following Jesus cost you?
5. Do you know someone struggling with their faith? How can you help someone else to see and believe in Jesus?



# lesson 13



## The Heart of the Matter

### MAIN IDEA

Religious practices and traditions will never make us acceptable to God.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Do I have a new heart?

### STUDY AIM

To understand that Jesus died of a broken heart so we can have a new heart

### QUICK READ

The religious leaders of Jesus' day were very meticulous about obeying the multitude of laws in the Old Testament. Jesus was criticized because His disciples did not follow the ceremonial hand washing ritual many Orthodox Jews practiced before eating.

## Introduction

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Attending summer church camp as a sponsor can be challenging. Sleepless nights, activity-filled days, and smelly cabins make for an interesting experience. Camp worship time can also be unconventional. At a church camp I once attended, the preacher proclaimed wonderful, biblically based sermons while wearing a baseball cap. Interestingly, the preacher would remove his cap to pray but read Scripture with it remaining perched atop his head.

Religious practices and traditions change from culture to culture and generation to generation. What may be acceptable, even expected for one group may be seen as irreverent to another. In Mark 7, Jesus got in a bit of trouble for not teaching His disciples to follow certain traditions, specifically, the tradition of washing their hands before they ate. Jesus declared that religious practices and traditions will never make us acceptable to God.

### Mark 7:1–23

<sup>1</sup>The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus <sup>2</sup>and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. <sup>3</sup>(The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. <sup>4</sup>When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

<sup>5</sup>So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?”

<sup>6</sup> He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. <sup>7</sup>They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.'

<sup>8</sup> You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions."

<sup>9</sup> And he continued, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! <sup>10</sup>For Moses said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' <sup>11</sup>But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)— <sup>12</sup>then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. <sup>13</sup>Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."

<sup>14</sup> Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. <sup>15</sup>Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them."

<sup>17</sup> After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. <sup>18</sup>"Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? <sup>19</sup>For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)

<sup>20</sup> He went on: "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. <sup>21</sup>For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, <sup>22</sup>adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. <sup>23</sup>All these evils come from inside and defile a person."

## **Traditions of the Elders (7:1–8)**

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What makes a person clean or unclean? For us, this question is likely about hygiene. But for Jesus' contemporaries, in first-century Israel, the question goes much, much deeper.

Throughout the first six chapters of the gospel of Mark, Jesus' popularity had been growing. News of His miracles had spread outside Jerusalem and had circulated throughout the backwoods of Galilee, where people didn't always follow the religious traditions of the more orthodox Jews. In Jerusalem, the shadow of the Temple affected everyday life. Word of Jesus, and His miracles, spread even further, reaching those outside the Jewish faith. Could outsiders, Gentiles and pagans, be acceptable to God too?

Jesus brought the issue of what makes one acceptable to God to the forefront. This was not a positive lesson from Jesus. He seemed a bit miffed at having to address the issue of hand washing. He was being criticized by some Pharisees and scribes for not teaching His disciples to follow religious tradition, specifically not washing their hands before supper.

The Pharisees were viewed as the gatekeepers of religious tradition of the day. They were self-appointed, goody-two-shoes when it came to Jewish practices and the law. They prided themselves on being the only ones in Israel to practice what they preached. They were especially good at pointing out when others failed to follow the rules. And in this text, they point out Jesus' inability to teach His disciples according to the law, or at least their interpretation of the law.

It's important to understand what "clean and unclean" meant in first-century Judaism. It isn't a hygiene discussion. The issue

of cleanness addressed in this Scripture is about morality, righteousness, and the presence of sin. We shouldn't feel bad not knowing this point, the author of the gospel must explain what all the fuss is about to his own readers in verses 2–6.

The gospel of Mark is likely, Peter's story, written by John Mark to new believers in Rome around AD 60. These Christians did not come from a Jewish background as many of the traditions, like represented here in this text, had to be explained. So why then is this story important if it's about a Jewish tradition that Jesus seemed to be against? How do we as the New Testament church deal with Old Testament law? Is it negated through Jesus? Or did Jesus, somehow, fulfill the law as He proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount? (Matthew 5:17–20).

Tension between religious practices was a common problem in the first-century church as it included Jewish and Gentile Christians. Jewish believers brought their traditions. And pagan worshipers certainly brought other traditions and rituals. We read about this tension in the New Testament letters written to Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, and others.

What about us? Do we have any traditions or rituals in the 21st century church? What about in the American church? What about as a Baptist church or another denomination?

For instance, what about the tradition of removing one's hat to pray. Does God ignore our prayer if we wear a baseball cap? (It may depend on the team.) Does wearing a cap during a time of worship make one unclean or less holy? For some, it might seem so. But what about cultures that require wearing a hat or a head-covering as a sign of reverence to pray?

For the Pharisees, practicing certain traditions had become a symbol of cleanness, righteousness before God. In the Old Testament, the issue of ceremonial washing had to do with the purity of Israel. The people of Israel were to be set apart, holy. And certain ceremonies, traditions, or practices set them apart as God's people. The ceremonial marching around the city of Jericho until the walls fell down would have certainly made an impact on other nations (Joshua 5:13–6:21). However, many of those ceremonies that were set apart for certain places or certain times, by the first century, had become part of every day, ordinary circumstances. The burden of the law and all these traditions was crushing.

Notice the context of this interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees. It wasn't in the Temple or the Synagogue. It wasn't a high, holy day like Passover. It was in the everyday, ordinary event of eating a meal or enjoying a snack.

To adhere to all the traditions and laws had become burdensome for the people of Israel in Jesus' day. Many simply ignored religion altogether. Others, like the Pharisees, touted their ability to remain clean by using legal loopholes, like the one Jesus described in verses 9–15.

## **Garbage Out, Garbage In (7:9–15)**

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Jesus gave an illustration of how some religious rule-keepers used one law to avoid following another law. This particular legal loophole involved “corban” or vowing to give one's possessions to God. This vow didn't kick in until death, much like an estate plan today. Therefore, the person could use the possession until they died rather than having to use it to take care of their parents, be-

cause the possession belonged to God. This may not make sense to us, as the responsibility to care for immediate family carries a lot of weight. But the point Jesus was making is that the Pharisees place a lesser law, “corban” or vow keeping, over and above a clear commandment, to honor one’s father and mother, in a morally reprehensible way.

### **Phylacteries and Tassels (Matthew 23:5–7)**

The Pharisees wanted people to notice their piety and acts of righteousness. They worked hard to show others how important the traditions of the elders were to them. In Matthew 23:5–7, Jesus pointed out how long their tassels and wide their phylacteries had become. Tassels on the garments of religious leaders related how many prayers they could recite. Phylacteries were boxes that held Scripture and were strapped to one arm or tied to a headband. These were very noticeable as public proclamations of one’s piety and ability to follow tradition. Jesus noted how these additions had gained the Pharisees notoriety in the marketplace and the best seats in the Synagogue. However, someone always had longer tassels and bigger phylacteries.

Jesus claimed these religious rule-keepers had placed “the traditions of men” and their own interpretation of the law above the commands of God thus becoming hypocrites. This would have been a particularly embarrassing pejorative for the Pharisees who saw themselves as the only ones in all of Israel who truly followed the commands of God, thus they were undefiled and holy.

Interpreting Scripture and interpreting God's commands hasn't gotten any easier. It's still hard for us to interpret the meaning of some Scriptures, God's commands. Are we to follow the letter of the law or the spirit of the law? As culture creeps into these decisions, do we sometimes interpret the law to justify what we want to do, retaining our own traditions and rituals?

The problem with legal loopholes is they just don't lead us to holiness.

For Jesus to say that nothing outside a person can make them unclean would have shocked the crowd that day. It would have turned their contemporary understanding of purity practices upside down. These words went directly against the traditional interpretation of the day.

## **The Stain Runs Deep (7:16–23)**

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On a cold, wintery day, your mother may have said, "You better put on your coat before going outside or you'll catch a cold." I heard that all my life. I hated wearing coats, scarves, and gloves. The day I learned that colds come from germs and not cold weather was earth-shattering. It was a monumental event that led to me never wearing a coat again. Maybe it wasn't that big of a deal, but it was significant in what I understood about the way the world works.

For many who heard the argument between Jesus and the Pharisees that day, Jesus had redefined the way the world worked. The way certain traditions were viewed. He revealed that internal purity went much deeper than a simple ritual could change. Even His disciples were taken aback by what Jesus said. They asked



for clarity on the subject. Wanting to make sure that He had the disciples' attention, Jesus asked them, "are you so dull?" Then He seemed to say that all foods were clean.

Finally, bacon is back on the menu. You may remember that certain food laws were prescribed in the Old Testament. And bacon, or anything that came from a pig was not acceptable to eat. According to the law, pigs were unclean animals (Leviticus 11:7–8). It would appear that Jesus redefined Old Testament food laws. Yet, food laws remained a sticking point even after this event and throughout the New Testament.

In Acts 10:9–16, Peter had a dream about unclean food that came down from Heaven and God said to Peter, eat whatever you want. Yet Peter refused, claiming that he had never eaten anything unclean. Peter was obviously still struggling with Old Testament laws long after the resurrection and Jesus' ascension to Heaven.

### **Which Translation of the Bible Is Best?**

I'm often asked which Bible translation is the best. My typical response is, the one you use. The emphasis on most translations is either on form or function. The NRSV and NKJV emphasize a more formal, literal approach. The NIV's emphasis is on function or ease of use. I would suggest getting comfortable using two different translations. One to enjoy reading and one to aid you in Bible study. There are many Bible apps that you can download with multiple translations. Find what translation speaks to you and one that might challenge you.

Out of all the Bible translations, I prefer to use the New International Version (NIV). It is the translation I grew up reading. However, the NIV does a particularly bad job translating verse 19. The Greek transliteration of this verse reads, “Because it does not enter of him into the heart but into the stomach, and into the latrine goes out, cleansing all foods.” The final section of the verse, “cleansing all foods,” is clearly a continuation of Jesus speaking. The New King James Version (NKJV) uses red letters for the entire verse denoting Jesus own words were spoken. The NIV addition of parentheses around this final statement is troublesome, making an aside possibly to explain what Jesus meant. This was in no way part of the original intent.

So, what did Jesus mean in verse 19? Does the stomach cleanse all food or the latrine? Or did *He* declare all foods clean. It’s not clear and there is much debate on how we should interpret this verse. Whatever the interpretation, it’s not the main point Jesus is making.

The main point Jesus is making: any evil that comes out of a person was already there before they ate dinner with dirty hands. Uncleaness is a moral problem that a ritual or ceremony will not fix.

Evil actions come from an unclean, impure heart leading to an unclean, impure mind. Instead of garbage in, garbage out, Jesus teaches garbage out, garbage in. Evil actions and thoughts reveal that evil is already inside. Evil is a moral deficiency that leads to defiled actions. To change the action through ceremonies, rituals or traditions without addressing the heart never works. The stain of sin runs too deep.

And we, who are stained inside, often hurt others. The sins and vices Jesus mentions are all relational; evil done to others. We may not mean to hurt others, we may even try certain rituals, practices, and traditions in the hopes that it will change us. But it never will, for the defilement is on the inside, and the stains of sin run too deep. We need a new heart.

## **Implications and Actions**

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Unfortunately, in this text, Jesus never revealed how to have a clean and pure heart. He came close in verse 8, yet no one can hold to the commands of God perfectly. Only Jesus could. He showed us the way to a new heart. By dying, a sinner's death on a cross. Shedding His perfect, sinless blood so all who trust in Him, as the way, the truth, and the life, may be cleansed. Only through Jesus, we who are defiled by sin, are made righteous.

Religious practices and human traditions cannot cleanse us. They cannot make us acceptable to God. The stain of sin runs much deeper than superficial ceremonies can ever purify. Only Jesus provides the way for all of creation to be cleansed.

## **Questions**

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1. What religious rituals, practices, or traditions do you follow? Are they restorative or sanctimonious? Is there a difference?



# lesson 14



## Optional Christmas Lesson

# God With Us

### MAIN IDEA

The fact that God delivered the first gospel message to shepherds instead of a king tells us that the good news is for all people, not just the wealthy and educated.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Do I know God personally?

### STUDY AIM

To understand that God put on human flesh so we can know Him personally

### QUICK READ

The shepherds heard God's invitation and traveled into Bethlehem to meet baby Jesus. They were so excited that verse 17 says, "they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child." That means they became the very first evangelists for Jesus.

## Introduction

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Have you ever had to drop everything, to spread news of an event? My daughter was born on December 20, just a few days before Christmas. When the event of her birth came to our family, we dropped everything to spread the news. Christmas shopping, parties, and travel plans all took a back seat to the good news of this joyous event. The Christmas season is filled with so many obligations it can seem impossible to set all the other things aside and share even the best news.

In this familiar Christmas story, we find the first people to receive the Good News of the birth of the Messiah was a group of shepherds keeping watch over their flocks at night. The Good News of great joy was so exciting that they dropped everything to faithfully go and spread this amazing news that Jesus Christ had been born.

### Luke 2:1–20

<sup>1</sup>In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. <sup>2</sup>(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup>And everyone went to their own town to register.

<sup>4</sup>So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. <sup>5</sup>He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, <sup>7</sup>and she gave birth to her firstborn, a

son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

<sup>13</sup> Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

<sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

<sup>16</sup> So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

## Unexpected Travel Plans (2:1–8)

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Everyone was returning to their hometown. It wasn't because of a holiday but to register for the census. Despite expecting a baby, Joseph and Mary traveled to Joseph's ancestral home. He was from the house or line of King David. This is a very important clue the gospel writer is giving us. This reminds us of Joseph's, and thereby Jesus' genealogy. Although, adoptive genealogy, legally Jesus was still considered to be in the line of King David.

The expectant family was going to Bethlehem for a census, or to be counted. This census was most likely for tax purposes. In the eyes of Caesar, in the eyes of the Roman Empire, and in the eyes of the world, people are items to be numbered, statistics. Time has not changed this view. Identifying people is a way to keep peace. If things are numbered, they are easier to manage and govern. Numbers are simpler to control than people with diverse personalities, opinions, and dreams. Like everyone else, Mary and Joseph traveled home to be counted.

Why did Mary go? Verse 3 claims, "everyone went to their own town to be register." They weren't going to Mary's hometown but the head of the household, to the father's hometown. In Ancient Israel, women weren't typically counted except at certain times for a poll tax and even then, it didn't really matter where a person was when they were counted. There are several guesses as to why Mary went to Bethlehem. Maybe she wanted to see Joseph's hometown. To visit where his family came from and to see the sites. Or maybe she didn't want to be alone in the late stages of her pregnancy. Maybe Joseph wanted to be there for the birth. Even so, this was not an easy trip. Ninety miles separat-



ed Nazareth from Bethlehem. We may not know why Mary went too, only that in doing so, prophecy was fulfilled. God often uses unexpected means and methods to further His will. A census, an ordinary young family, even shepherds can be part of God's grand plan.

Shepherds were an interesting lot. These early ranchers lived out on the prairie and smelled like it. Typically, shepherds were homeless and had a reputation for being dishonest. Some were slaves who had lost everything and out of employment options. Not formally educated in a trade, these men were experts at many things. They had experience in all kinds of informal, educational events that meant life or death for them and the sheep they watched over. Shepherds were not softies; they were hardened men.

Shepherds were viewed as unclean by first-century, Jewish standards of the law. Unfit for any other duty or to be around civilized people, these outcasts and sinners would not be welcome in most towns and especially in the local synagogue. Spiritual matters were not something shepherds had much experience with. Yet it was to them the angel first appeared and spoke of a promise fulfilled. Amazingly, God can use the most unexpected means and methods to accomplish His will.

## **A Sign Shines in the Night (2:9–14)**

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These rough and tumble characters were caught off guard by God's radiance as reflected in these divine beings. That ordinary night on the prairie was interrupted by God's uninvited and unexpected grace. Frequently, God shows up as an interruption to

our own busy lives. These sudden interruptions bring good news that change and transform ordinary, mundane moments into divine experiences. These experiences can terrify even the most unspiritual, hardened people.

“Don’t be afraid!” An appropriate phrase of good news when facing terrifying moments. All throughout Scripture, do not fear is a wonderful reminder that God is in control even when facing unexpected interruptions. Angels realized that their presence would scare humans. But the good news of peace that has come through the birth of the Messiah, quickly turns fear into celebration.

## **Jesus Messiah Is No Secret**

Right from the beginning of his gospel, Luke wanted everyone to know who this Child is. There is no guessing or uncertainty, this Child is the Messiah, the Savior of the world. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus’ identity is hidden. What Bible scholars refer to as the “messianic secret” is even part of Jesus’ own strategy as He told His disciples to keep His identity to themselves. Luke has a very high Christology. From Jesus’ birth, Luke used the word Messiah, which is Hebrew for “anointed one,” as a title. In the Greek, it is *Χριστός*, which is translated into English as *Christ*. Jesus Messiah is the Lord and Savior of the world. He is where our salvation comes from, and Luke wants to proclaim this to all.

In this beautiful picture depicted in verses 13–14, the gospel writer offered a striking parallel for us. He contrasted glory and

peace, highest heaven and earth, God and humans. This “heavenly host,” better translated “a heavenly army,” appeared to the shepherds in the fields at night, praising God. Our story began with Caesar counting the people as a way of keeping the peace but here we find God’s army praising the true King who brings real peace to the earth in a way no other can. These heavenly warriors raise their voices, not their fists, to sing about a mediator who has brought all these contrasting things together. The Messiah overcame the separation, providing a way, that all people can now draw close to God. Finding peace, finding acceptance, finding a home came in the most unlikely place, through the most unlikely person.

The angels proclaimed to the shepherds that the One had come who would provide community, a home even for the outcast. A sign announcing to these hardened, unspiritual souls that they were not a statistic to be counted but persons of immense value, created for far more than they had ever imagined. Those far from home, those without a home, those who can’t go home, can find a home in the presence of the Christ-child.

The shepherds obediently hurried off to witness this sign situated in a lowly manger, in a lowly town. There they found the greatest gift this world has ever experienced. The Messiah’s coming had been promised throughout biblical history. The words of prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah, of One to come and fill an empty throne, had finally come true. But this fulfillment seemed impossible, even forgotten until the carol of this celestial army rang over the fields that night, leading ordinary shepherds to drop everything and share the good news.

## **Outcasts and Evangelists (2:15–20)**

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The problem with dropping everything is that responsibilities can get in the way. When the shepherds hurried off that night, who was left to watch their sheep? Were the “fields nearby,” as stated in verse 8, near enough for them to visit the baby while keeping a watchful eye on their master’s sheep? Nevertheless, the news was so good that without hesitation, the shepherds “hurried off” to see this child that fulfilled all the words of the prophets.

Regardless of it being the middle of the night. Regardless of the darkness they would have to stumble through along the way. Regardless of the multiple mangers around Bethlehem. Regardless of no map to guide them. Regardless of having to leave their work unfinished. Regardless of all the inconveniences, the shepherds dropped everything to welcome Jesus into their lives.

### **Spreading the Good News of Great Joy**

These are some ways you and your family can share Christ’s arrival this season.

- Visit a Senior Living facility and sing Christmas carols or join in a craft.
- Invite a lonely neighbor for a meal or to watch a funny Christmas movie.
- Slow down enough to look a restaurant server or store clerk in the eye and call them by name as you wish them a Merry Christmas.
- Share your personal testimony with someone.
- Ask someone how you can pray for them.

Similarly, God's call to us comes at inconvenient times. This interruption to share the Good News of great joy comes when so many other important things are happening. What an unimpressive scene it must have been when the shepherds found Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus. It wasn't a palace with grand halls or a crib of in-laid gold, where one might expect a child-king to reside. It was in a lowly manger where they found the Messiah. A place where the poorest, most ordinary people might welcome a child into the world.

Whatever these men expected to find, surely it wasn't this. They must have been let down by what they found after hurrying off so faithfully, leaving their worldly responsibilities behind. An ordinary baby, in an ordinary manger, in an ordinary town, born to ordinary parents. Mary and Joseph must have looked a sight. This young mother wondering what to do with a little child so far from home. The ordinary fears of first-time parents surely were apparent to the visitor's that night.

But none of the ordinariness of this moment mattered because of what the celestial being had told them. The Messiah, the Christ was there. The sign of the miracle they would find was there before them. A "baby wrapped in cloth, lying in a manger." This common, ordinary occasion held extraordinary significance.

The God of creation put on flesh and stepped into the created order. He humbled Himself, setting aside the richness of the heavenly kingdom, to step into the temporal chaos. Not even to be welcomed into a rich and powerful family, which one might consider just a step below Heaven, but to be born in a filthy, putrid barn. Jesus, God in the flesh, made Himself nothing, in or-

der to make you something. The very extraordinary child you are created to be.

God is so great. He sends just the right people, at just the right time. Whatever those hardened, dirty, rough, and tumble men told Mary that night, she treasured in her heart. Those ordinary shepherds brought a wonderful word of encouragement to the new parents.

Surprisingly, those shepherds who lived in fields, were the first evangelists. When they returned to their ordinary responsibilities, they shared an extraordinary message that amazed all who heard them. The good news brought great joy for all people. The Messiah had come. When these men returned to the business of their lives, they returned transformed by the experience of seeing Jesus.

## **Implications and Actions**

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When we drop everything for Jesus, it is never an inconvenience but an incredible, divine opportunity that brings joy into our lives and the lives of others. This story, the Christmas story is truly a mystery. Who would believe such an outlandish tale, told by ordinary shepherds? Yet here we are today, still celebrating the good news, telling others of this peace that has come to earth.

Many still visit the proposed site of the manger scene. Christians, Jews, Palestinians, Israelis, Muslims, and atheists gather at the place where Jesus was born. Who will believe? For those who are willing to drop everything for Jesus, we just might find ourselves in a divine opportunity, to share the good news of God's love with those still amazed at what they hear. This call can be

inconvenient, it can come in the middle of work, in the middle of the night, even in the middle of Christmas vacation. In these ordinary moments, God's grace interrupts, often unexpected and uninvited. Will you answer?

## **Questions**

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1. What big event has happened in your own life that you couldn't wait to share with others? Were others as excited to hear the news?
  
2. What are you busy with in this season of your life? Is it keeping you from serving the Lord?
  
3. What kind of person would be a surprise if God were to use them to further His will?





## Fear Not

“When I am afraid, I put my trust in you” (Psalm 56:3, ESV).

Father,

I humbly approach You with a heart of worship, reverence, and inexpressible joy. May my eyes be continually before You, Oh God, the One who is sovereign over all things in Heaven and on the earth. Your Holy Word says, “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters” (Psalm 24:1–2, NIV). I thank You for Your guiding hand in my life and for growing my faith and trust in You as I daily surrender to You.

I pour out my praise to You, Oh God, for Jesus, Your Son, who holds all things in His hands and has divine authority and control over all of creation. I read in Your Holy Word how Jesus displayed His great power over nature as He spoke, “Peace! Be still!” and calmed the wind and the waves, as the disciples feared for their lives on the Sea of Galilee when a great storm arose (Mark 4:35–41). I pray that when I am afraid, I will put my trust in Jesus, knowing He sustains all things, and nothing can stand against Him.

Lord, I admit that just like the disciples, storms of life sometimes surprise me, come out of nowhere and grip my heart with fear and doubt. Thank You that just as Jesus calmed the turbulent sea, He also calms my raging heart, giving me assurance and peace, showing me His grace and love. Cultivate in me a heart that focuses on Jesus and not the circumstances that surround me. Your Word says, “For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control” (2 Timothy 1:7, ESV). Thank You, Lord, that You continue to prime and grow my trust in You day by day and moment by moment. Deliver me from the overwhelming power of fear and make me vastly aware that Jesus sits on the throne of my heart, empowering me with boldness and courage.

Lord, just like fire refines gold and silver, removing their impurities, You often use the trials and storms in my life to prune and cut away those things that deprive me of spiritual growth. You teach me to have a posture of humility before You, as You transform me, making me more like Jesus. Lord, when I encounter trials give me steadfastness to cling to You and Your Word, trusting in Your sovereignty, even when You seem to be silent. May I retreat deeper in prayer, praying with intensity and without ceasing. Give me courage and joy within my heart, knowing that You are growing my faith as I learn to trust You more.

Lord, may I never forget the question the disciples asked, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:41b, ESV). I bow my heart to You as I worship and dwell richly on Jesus my Savior, the name above all names, the great I Am, the One who has no beginning and no end, the promised King, Your only Son, the Messiah, who left His home in glory and willingly died on a cruel cross to redeem me from the penalty of my sin, the perfect sacrifice, a Lamb without blemish or defect. I give praise to the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, my Good Shepherd, the True Vine, the Way, the Door, the only One who secures my salvation by His righteousness, and reconciles me to You, a holy, just, and merciful God. My heart is eternally grateful that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life, the One who rose in victory on the third day, conquering sin and death, once and for all, and gives abundant and eternal life to all who put their faith in Him. All praise, glory, and honor to the King of kings and Lord of lords, the Lion of Judah, the root of David, the Bright Morning Star, the One who is coming again and when He appears, every knee will bow, and tongue confess that, He is Lord. I raise my hands as my heart sings hallelujah, hallelujah, worthy is the Lamb!

In the strong name of Jesus,

Amen

*DLB*

# Our Next New Study

(Available to use beginning March 2025)

## ***Kingdom Assignment*** ***The Relentless Pursuit of Obedience***

### **A Study of Nehemiah**

In the first year of his reign (seventy years after the prophecy of Jeremiah) Cyrus, King of Persia, sent out a decree throughout the land allowing Hebrews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Zerubbabel led a group of 42,360, almost eight hundred miles back to Jerusalem for this task.

Decades later, Ezra, the priest, led a remnant back to Jerusalem to call for a reconciliation with God. Thirteen years later, Nehemiah led a third team to rebuild the walls. Jerusalem was still desolate; the walls and the gates of the city remained as they were when the armies of Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city.

Nehemiah was an unlikely choice. He was cupbearer of King Artaxerxes, living in the Persian capitol of Susa. He had a prestigious place of influence serving the king. Why would he jeopardize the security of his position for a risky and dangerous task? Yet, Nehemiah never forgot Jerusalem, nor the God of Israel.

Nehemiah is a historical book including lessons on leadership and dependence on prayer. He was the one who relentlessly pursued the will of God. His unlikely journey included cupbearer, re-builder of walls, and finally governor of the people.

The Apostle Paul wrote, “I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12). In Kingdom Assignment, we are reminded that just as God had a plan for Nehemiah’s life, He also has a plan for us. May our lives be devoted to seeking the Kingdom Assignments God has already planned for us.

Lesson 1	Discovering Our Kingdom Assignment	Nehemiah 1:1–3, 11
Lesson 2	The Humble Prayer of a Leader	Nehemiah 1:4–11
Lesson 3	Arise and Build!	Nehemiah 2:11–20
Lesson 4	Mobilizing the People	Nehemiah 3:1–5
Lesson 5	Overcoming the Enemy	Nehemiah 4:1–8
Lesson 6	Confronting Injustice	Nehemiah 5:6–13
Lesson 7	Don’t Be Fooled!	Nehemiah 6:10–14
Lesson 8	Finish the Task	Nehemiah 6:15–19
Lesson 9	The Joy of the Lord Is Your Strength	Nehemiah 8:9–12
Lesson 10	True Confession	Nehemiah 9:1–3
Lesson 11	Leading By Example	Nehemiah 10:28–30
Lesson 12	Time to Celebrate	Nehemiah 12:40–47
Lesson 13	Remember the Sabbath	Nehemiah 13:15–22
Easter	What If Christ Had Not Been Raised?	1 Corinthians 15:1–20

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