

Connect Group Studies



'Bringing God and people together'

Advanced Study Devotional - Mark 4:35-41

*From THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK. By Scott Grant
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Mark anchors the story of the calming of the sea in Jesus' parable teaching in a way that foreshadows the crucifixion and resurrection. In the parables, Jesus taught that the kingdom of God was coming—but not in a way that anyone expected.

In the parable of the sower, some who hear the word of the kingdom fall away because of affliction or persecution. When the storm comes, will the disciples likewise fall away? The parables of the lamp and the measure challenged the disciples to listen carefully to the teaching of Jesus because they would need it later. As the waves swamp the boat, their time of need has come. The kingdom that Jesus and his disciples are advancing is like the little mustard seed in one of the parables. Will the mustard seed grow up to become larger than all the garden plants, or will it drown in the Sea of Galilee? In the parable of the seed, the man goes to sleep and literally "rises" to see that the seeds have sprouted. In the story of the calming of the sea, Jesus goes to sleep and literally "rises," whereupon he stills the storm. Jesus would figuratively go to sleep on the cross but literally rise from the tomb. The structure of Mark 4:35-41 places the "rising" of Jesus at the climactic center. The kingdom of God is coming in and through Jesus—through his death and resurrection—confounding even his disciples. Just as fear grips the disciples after Jesus calms the sea, fear gripped his followers after the resurrection (Mark 16:8). At this point, the disciples are like worried farmers, unable to trust that the seed, once planted, will sprout—that Jesus, once crucified, will rise from the dead. They have much to learn about the kingdom of God.

We too have much to learn about the kingdom of God and much to learn from the parables, which disclose its working. The parables teach us to look beyond appearances, to listen carefully to Jesus, to believe that nothing on heaven or earth can stop the kingdom of God—neither wind nor waves, neither terrorists nor economic instability. The parables teach us to keep believing and to keep doing the work of the gospel even in the face of the fiercest storm. They teach us faith.

In this passage, Mark evokes an overarching storyline from the Hebrew Scriptures.

The creation story tells how the Lord gathered the waters and made dry land appear (Genesis 1:9).

Reflecting on the creation story, the psalmist says that the waters fled at God's "rebuke," just as the wind died down when Jesus rebuked it (Psalm 104:7). The Israelites, not a seafaring lot, equated the seas with the abode of evil.

In the exodus, the Israelites became frightened when the Egyptians drew near, just as the disciples became frightened in the storm. However, God divided the waters of the Red Sea with a strong wind so that dry land appeared and thus allowed the Israelites to finally extricate themselves from the Egyptians, who were drowned when the sea returned to its normal state. In contrast, Jesus turned back a strong wind to rescue his disciples (Exodus 14).

During the exile, while Babylon held Israel captive, the prophet Daniel had a vision in which four evil beasts, evocative of the kingdoms of the world, emerged from the wind-whipped sea. These kingdoms, though, gave way to "one like a Son of Man," whose dominion is everlasting (Daniel 7). Jesus, who has already identified himself as the Son of Man, conquers the waves that emerge from the sea (Mark 2:10, 28).

In the first century, Israel, held captive by Rome, expected the decisive triumph of the kingdom of God to take the form of a new exodus: a greater return from exile. God would act in a powerful way to restore his people (Isaiah 40:1-11, 43:1-7). Israel saw itself as a sort of lynchpin: its restoration would signal the restoration of creation. Creation, in bondage to futility since sin entered the world, would experience its own exodus (Romans 8:18-22).

Mark's story also echoes Psalm 107:23-32, which recounts how God, in the context of his faithfulness to defeat evil, rescued terrified sailors who cried out to him: He caused the storm to be still, So that the waves of the sea were hushed. (Psalm 107:29)

When Jesus makes a way through the sea, rescuing his frightened disciples, Mark wants us to see that the story of Israel—and therefore the story of creation—is reaching its climax in Jesus the Messiah. God is defeating everything evil. All that Israel could hope for, all that the world could hope for, all that creation could hope for—all that we could hope for—is coming true. The kingdom of God has drawn near. When Jesus conquers a storm in your life or enables you to persevere and go deeper in faith in the middle of a storm, it's a sign that the kingdom of God has drawn near—drawn near to you.

Answering the questions Jesus asks us in Mark 4:35-41, especially in the context of the storms of life, builds our faith in him—the kind of faith that's willing to follow him into unfamiliar territory for the sake of the gospel.