

THE GOSPEL OF BELIEF - Studies in John's Gospel - Part twenty-four

Sunday, September 22nd, 2013, 10 a.m. - Teaching #1673

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A DARK NIGHT, STRONG WINDS, OVERPOWERING WAVES, AND AN ABSENT JESUS

John 6:14-21 - "When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" [15] Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself. [16] When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, [17] got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. [18] The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. [19] When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. [20] But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." [21] Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going."

This miracle is covered by John with much less detail than the synoptic writers. As I was putting this series together I was torn as to how much time to give it. The incident itself is covered by John in only six verses - **16-21**.

But Mark indicates this account of Jesus walking on the water is bigger than the event itself. I mean the account gives evidence to something bigger than John's six verses. Consider what Mark says about Jesus walking on the water and the disciples' fearful response. There's one sentence that opens the lid for deeper study:

Mark 6:49-52 - "...but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, [50] for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." [51] And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, [52] for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened."

What do those last words mean? In what sense is this account of Jesus walking on the water related to the feeding of the 5000 with the loaves just prior? And that question is what made me take the incident - albeit very briefly recorded by John - all by itself for study. We know for sure that we're not imagining things when we link it up with the sign of the multiplication of the loaves because the *Scriptures themselves* force us to do so.

So let's turn our minds to what we can learn from this text today:

1) **WHEN YOU DON'T SENSE CHRIST'S PRESENCE CONTINUE TO DO WHAT HE SAYS**

There is no way to live in this world without going through dark times - sometimes *prolonged* seasons where all you claim to believe about Jesus is put to the test. Look at this account. When they need Jesus *most* He's not *present*. He was there with them on the land. He was there when there was no threat of wind and sea. They were just with Him as the crowds sang His praises and wanted to make Him their king. The disciples were as popular as Jesus when the people had their bellies freshly filled with bread and fish. O, He was there with them then, and it was wonderful - so good to be in His presence.

But now it was all so different. Life doesn't stay the same for any of us and the storms never come at convenient times. Now it was all darkness. The sure-footedness of the safe, dry land was replaced by waves that threatened to drown their hopes and dreams. Their *future* seemed doomed. And Jesus was nowhere to be found as their lives were battered by the waves.

Is that you? Has your life gone from sunny to dark with no warning? So what do you do when there's nothing but storm and blackness? What do you do when Jesus isn't in the boat, or even on the horizon? That's where the lesson of this text is supremely useful. When Jesus finally comes to them they're doing the last thing He commanded them to do. Mark gives us an important detail that John leaves out:

Mark 6:45 - "Immediately *he made* his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd."

Getting into the boat and heading out for *Bethsaida* (Capernaum) wasn't the *disciples'* plan. It was *Jesus'* command to them. They were pressing out at night because Jesus *told* them to do so. And when Jesus finally comes to them in their night of darkness and wind and toil - when Jesus *finally* comes to them after His painful, prolonged absence - that's what they're still doing. They're just plodding along *against the gale - in the darkness* - with *no apparent divine help whatsoever*

- toward Capernaum.

Life Lesson: *don't let what you don't sense of divine presence and help drown out what you know you should still be doing.* Obey the instruction of Christ when doing so doesn't seem to be doing you any immediate good. Keep obeying even when it is the obeying that seems to be making life hard and difficult. That's the point. It was the **obedience** of the disciples that was placing them out there against the storm.

If you only obey Jesus when He crowns your circumstances with sunlight and icing you will get bitter and quit following Him when the storm comes. The next point takes this idea even further:

2) **THE PURPOSE OF TIMES OF BLESSING AND JOY IS TO STRENGTHEN AND TRAIN US FOR SEASONS OF STORM AND DARKNESS**

This is where our opening supplementary text from Mark is so deep and profound - **Mark 6:49-52** - **"....but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, [50] for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." [51] And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, [52] for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened."**

These are hard words to figure out. What didn't the disciples understand about the multiplied loaves? And what did this have to do with Jesus coming to them and the waves instantly subsiding?

Think about those questions. What had the disciples **not** understood about the multiplied loaves? Certainly they knew a miracle had been performed. They **saw** the 5000 men fed and the twelve baskets of bread left over from only two barely loaves. The disciples weren't unimpressed. They marveled at the power of Jesus. The miracle did **not** go unnoticed.

So what didn't they **"understand"** about the loaves (**Mark 6:52**)? And why was this a problem in the storm on the Sea of Galilee? And right at this point we find application to our own walk with Jesus. One can **see** Jesus' work without **learning** from what He has done. It's easy to even be **thankful** for God's goodness without being **transformed** and **trained** as a result of God's goodness.

This happens when more attention is given to the **immediate effect** of God's work in our lives than **what that work says about the One doing that work on our behalf**. It happens when our hearts are more captured and held by the **blessing** from Jesus than **Jesus Himself**. The disciples had been more impressed by the **multiplied bread** than they had **considered what that bread taught about Jesus as God's revealed sovereign Son**.

It's easy to **marvel**. And it's easy to **eat and enjoy**. It doesn't take a big heart to enjoy good things. It's another thing to **think**. Blindness of understanding and hardness of heart result from **receiving blessing** from God without **applying lessons of grace** when no miracle seems forthcoming. The storm is where the heart gets tested. Do you stay close to Jesus when the darkness rolls in or do you just groan about the loss of blessing?

In other words, when God sends any evidence of blessing and grace into your life He does so in order that your faith may be fed by **pondering God's goodness when your faith is tried by His apparent absence in some future storm**.

If all we receive from our Lord is multiplied bread for our every hunger we never will deepen in faith. Faith is only grown when exercised. Faith is only developed by **changing challenges**. But to survive those trials we need the lessons recalled about those times when God manifested His care and provision in obvious fashion.

Before we leave this point, let me apply it with a specific example of this principle right from the Scriptures:

Romans 8:31-32 - **"What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? [32] He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"**

The context matters here. What are the **"these things"** in 31? Paul tells us in **verses 35-36** - **"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? [36] As it is**

written, **'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.'**

So **"these things"** are **tribulations, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger,** and the **sword**. And notice, these people didn't **escape** these things. And they weren't **delivered** from them either. No. They were **"being killed all the day long"** (36).

So what are we to conclude about God and His goodness from their slaughter? How do we scrape up any tiny residue of faith in the middle of stuff like that?

The answer is in our text. You **don't** scrape up faith from those circumstances. There's nothing there - nothing **in those things** - to feed faith. But there is still faith to be had and nourished. You sustain your faith, says Paul, by looking **at something else**. You take truth you learned **earlier** and **apply it to your storm**.

That's what Paul teaches in this great Romans text - **Romans 8:32** - **"He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"** When the storm comes go back to something you've already **experienced** of God's miraculous grace. This is how you keep your heart from becoming hard and blind.

Listen, your pain and your darkness is only going to frustrate you and darken your whole outlook. There's nothing there to feed your soul. You're just going to become bitter and discouraged. Set the gaze of your whole being somewhere else. There are loaves of bread in your past experience with Christ. **Don't let the storm make you dull to past grace**. Don't let the waves make you forget past bread. Feed your life by **pondering** God's goodness.

This, I think, is the **reason** Jesus delays His coming to them in the storm. John makes it clear that they had been struggling with the gale wind and waves for four miles. That's a long way at the oars. Mark tells us they didn't see any sign of Jesus until the fourth watch of the night - between 3 and 6 a.m.

Is this wasted time? What is it for? We usually need some time to deal with our own self-centeredness. Our **first** reaction when God doesn't meet our expectations usually isn't a good one. The disciples have to keep rowing for most of the night. They have to deal with the waves and they have to deal with their own thoughts for quite a while. And Jesus waits because, for us, **learning takes time**.

It takes time for spiritually mature thinking to develop. Time reveals our own impatience. Time forces us to confront our anger. And most of all, time, if rightly used, gives a wonderful opportunity to treasure eternal realities that no earthly storm can shake. That's where the growth is. God will do something great at the end of the night.