

# TEXARKANA REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

## MARK: HE TREADS UPON THE WAVES

MARK 6.45-56

DAVE WAGNER

---

1. Last time we saw the crowds come to Jesus in the desert, probably in order to put him at the head of a popular uprising. Jesus rejected that vision of himself and advanced a different one: He showed himself to stand in the stream of revelatory history, downstream from Moses and the Exodus and the Manna, and by his miracle meal of fish and loaves he pointed forward to the future Messianic Banquet. Yahweh provided bread in the wilderness and now Jesus, who is in the place of Yahweh, also provides bread in the wilderness.

2. Sadly, this special revelation of his person does not serve to make the crowds (or his disciples) any wiser; their insurrectionary intentions are still the same and so Jesus will now forcibly send his disciples over the lake and dismiss the crowds, retiring into the hills to pray alone.

3. Mark's goal is to present Jesus as the supernatural Son of God, and if bread in the wilderness were not enough, the next story might hit even harder. We're going to look at another lake miracle, similar to when Jesus was asleep in the boat and calmed the sea storm. One writer notes an interesting difference between that past calming of the storm and what Jesus is going to do on the lake in today's story: "He comes to them as a figure of mystery and terror, not a familiar companion to be awakened in a crisis. While the earlier incident was sufficiently astonishing to provoke a christological question, it's more down-to-earth atmosphere contrasts with the numinous appearance and impossible behavior of Jesus in this pericope, after which the disciples are left not so much impressed (as in 4.41) as bewildered and (metaphorically) out of their depth."

4. The eye-opening revelations of Jesus' person just get bigger and better, more and more gripping as the gospel progresses. We'll examine this next self-revelation today and consider the disciples' faulty response to it.

## THE TEXT

1. We begin in v45 as Jesus sends his disciples to another part of the lake by boat; the language here is surprisingly strong; Jesus is forcing his disciples into the boat quickly to get them away from the situation, then Jesus sends the crowds away. Again, this probably reflects the military intentions of the crowd and possibly also that the 12 were somewhat caught up in the political fervor. Once this is done Jesus retires into the hills to pray alone. "The mention of prayer in this context is a further clue of a messianic groundswell, for Mark notes Jesus praying at only three points in his ministry (1.35, 6.45, 14.35-39) Each is at night and in a lonely place, each finds the disciples removed from him and failing to understand his mission, and in each Jesus faces a formative decision or crisis. Following the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus reaffirms by prayer his calling to express his divine Sonship as a servant rather than as a freedom fighter against Rome."

2. V47 tells us when it was evening the disciples were in the middle of the lake while Jesus was still alone on land. Concerning the time of day for this event, consider the following: "The feeding of the five thousand began in the late afternoon. Since then considerable time has elapsed in the organization of the crowd, the feeding, the clearing up, and the dismissal of the crowd, so that *opsias gegomenes* ("when evening came") must represent a time well into the night rather than the conventional translation 'when evening came'. This is confirmed by the mention of the fourth watch (the last part of the night, before dawn, roughly 3-6am) in v48; indeed, the **double mention of 'seeing'...suggests that pre-dawn light** already allowed faint visibility. However strong the wind, a rowing boat is not likely to have taken ten hours or more to cross the northern part of the lake of Galilee, as would be required if *opsias gegomenas* is understood only of the evening."

3. Mark's description of the time in v48 is one more reason we believe his readers are Roman: "In dividing the night into four watches Mark follows the Roman custom rather than the threefold Jewish division, ostensibly for the benefit of his Roman readers."

4. We come to the heart of the text in v48, when Jesus sees the disciples straining at the oars, against a contrary wind, and walks out to pass by them in a special revelation of divine glory and power, one which has important connections to the OT: "As in the forgiveness of sins and in his power over nature, walking on the lake identifies Jesus unmistakably with God. This identification is reinforced when Jesus says, 'Take courage! It is I.' In Greek, 'It is I' (*ego eimi*) is identical with God's self-disclosure to Moses. Thus Jesus not only walks in God's stead but also takes his name. The latter part of v48 is not immediately clear, however. 'He was about to pass by them' is baffling, suggesting Jesus intended to walk past the disciples. In the OT, however, this nondescript phrase is charged with special force, signaling a rare self-revelation of God. At Mt. Sinai the transcendent Lord 'passed by' Moses in order to reveal his name and compassion. Again, at Mt. Horeb the Lord revealed his presence to Elijah in 'passing by'. The most important antecedent of the idea, however, comes in Job 9.8, 11: '[God] alone stretches out the heavens and treads upon the waves of the sea. When he passes me, I cannot see him; when he goes by, I cannot perceive him.'"

5. Stories such as this one make it obvious that Mark's chief aim in the gospel is to present to us a supernatural person of the highest dignity. He does not advance Jesus as merely a teacher to be studied or a rabbi to be followed, but a God to be worshiped. When we consider the paucity of direct teaching recorded by Mark we might also say, at least in Mark's Gospel, that the goal is not even primarily to relate to us Jesus' teaching, but rather to present to us the person of Jesus revealed through impossible acts of all-encompassing power and authority. This makes it all the more pathetic that interpreters in the modern period have gone to silly lengths to explain away the miraculous in this story in the hopes of making it fit for

modern readers: "Mark 6.45-52 was the object of intense interest in post-Enlightenment lives of Jesus. Starting from the premise that the 'laws of nature' are inviolable and that all things in the universe must be capable of rationalistic explanation, the most improbable and far-fetched theories were advanced to explain Jesus' walking on the Sea of Galilee. Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906) documents the opinions of scores of scholars who judged this story an optical illusion caused by Jesus walking along the shore, or a deception caused by his walking on a sandbar. For solely rationalistic interpreters, the story was a code to be cracked, a conundrum to be resolved. If Jesus walked on the water, it was like Xerxes crossing the Hellespont or Alexander's siege of the island fortress of Tyre: solid under-footing had to be found somewhere. The effect of this preoccupation was to limit the possibilities of the story and virtually eclipse its meaning. "

6. In v49 the disciples see Jesus and are terrified they are seeing a ghost: "Such a disembodied spirit must have seemed an obvious explanation also for the physically impossible action they now saw on the lake, and *fantasma*...denotes just such a ghost in both Jewish and pagan literature." "The sea, like the wilderness, was regarded as the dwelling place of demons." Jesus identifies himself with the important phrase, *ego eimi*, as mentioned above, and gets into the boat. At this point in v51 the wind stops, perhaps one more aspect to the work of power which the disciples have just witnessed.

7. Mark says the disciples were astonished at this event, which seems understandable, but apparently their astonishment included an inexcusable element of spiritual ignorance and even hard-hearted unbelief, judging by Mark's unflattering editorial in v52: "By this time, apparently, the disciples, if not the crowd, should have got beyond the stage of instinctive astonishment to one of understanding who Jesus is. In particular it seems that it is the loaves (i.e. the preceding miracle story) which should have caused them to see things in a new light. In 8.14-21 Jesus will himself directly rebuke the disciples for their failure to

grasp the significance of the feeding of the five thousand and of the four thousand (compare John 6.26-34 for a similar failure, this time on the part of the crowd, to draw the appropriate christological conclusions from the feeding of the five thousand). It is not immediately clear why among so many other remarkable acts of power the feeding miracles should be singled out as having such special **evidential value.**" **"Hooker...suggests that the two miracles are linked by their** relation to the two main miracles of the exodus period, the crossing of the sea and the provision of the manna; having seen Jesus 'reenact' the latter they should not have been surprised to see him now emulating the former." "This is remarkably strong language to use for what appears to be the natural slowness of ordinary people to adjust to the presence of the extraordinary in their midst, particularly in a gospel which has already used just these terms, and this same OT model, to describe outsiders and opponents of Jesus. Mark thus prepares us for a changing, and less flattering, perception of the disciples in the rest of the gospel." "Mark again reminds us that faith is not an inevitable result of knowing about Jesus, or even of being with Jesus. Faith is not something that happens automatically or evolves inevitably; it is a personal decision or choice. In the Gospel of Mark it is more often than not a decision that must be made in the face of struggle and trepidation. Discipleship is more endangered by lack of faith and hardness of heart than by external dangers."

8. V53-56 is one of the many summary statements of Jesus' activity which sometimes introduce or conclude narrative sections and which show Jesus was active in doing far more than is elaborated upon.

## **THEOLOGY**

1. The two points which come out of this text are first, the supernatural, divine person of Jesus, and second, the spiritual insensitivity/unbelief of his disciples. In spite of such a powerful revelation as the wilderness meal, and now Jesus walking on water, the disciples still fail to respond with the faith and understanding which

Jesus calls for: "Thus two themes run through this pericope. The first is clearly the supernatural power of Jesus, as Mark continues to build his picture of a Jesus who, though he could walk, eat, and sleep with his disciples as a master with pupils, is nonetheless more than an ordinary human being (compare OT descriptions of God walking on or through the sea: Job 9.8, Ps 77.19, Is 43.16). But corresponding to the increasingly supernatural character of the portrait of Jesus is the increasing inability of his disciples to cope with it."

2. Mark continues his aim to reveal Jesus as supernatural Son of God, but the interesting addition now is that whereas it has been outsiders who failed to perceive his person and mission, now his own inner ring is failing to do so. Jesus will continue to reveal himself as the gospel proceeds and his disciples will continue to fail to understand him, leading up both to Jesus' important rebuke of them in chapter 8, and ultimately the disciples' denial and abandonment of Jesus when he is arrested.

3. Jesus' supernatural person has basically been revealed by means of his extensive authority. He has authority over sin, Satan, sickness, death, Moses' Law, and in the miracles of multiplication and the lake miracles we see he has authority over nature. The OT taught Israel that it was Yahweh alone who made the water teem with fish and provided bread for all men; it also taught that Yahweh alone controlled the violent, chaotic forces of sea and storm. In fact one might look back, not only at the Exodus where Yahweh brought Israel through the sea safely and gave them miracle bread in the wilderness, but further back to creation where God controlled and ordered the sea, giving it boundaries, and miraculously filled both land and sea with animals and fish. In either case, we cannot miss that Mark locates Jesus in the role of Yahweh as Creator, Sustainer, Provider, Savior, Lord and absolute Authority over all things. Jesus has transitioned from the lowly carpenter of Nazareth to Job's Glorious Yahweh who, in majesty, treads upon the waves.

4. Now our assumption might be that so stunning a spectacle as the loaves or walking on water would result in the disciples exercising a powerful faith on the spot. Mark teaches us this isn't the case. We do see these revelations should produce faith; especially Mark implies this about the miracle of the loaves. But the gospel overall presents a general human blindness, insensitivity, and intractable unbelief. What's so surprising at this point is that the 12 are not immune to such a hard-hearted unbelief. Partly this is the result of cultural and religious assumptions which the 12 hold in common with the rest of Israel. However, we are probably right to point to a deeper cause: the characteristic human evil, the fatal human bent of sinfulness which arises chiefly from deep-seated unbelief in God. Our breaking of commandments issues from our hard hearts; our hearts being hard essentially means they are wrong in their orientation to God. The fundamental human response to God is faith. By this God is pleased and we enjoy all the benefits of eternal life and redemption; without it we fall into a condition of lostness, enmity toward God, idolatry and lawlessness which is the life of the sinner, whether religious or irreligious.

5. And how does Mark present faith? Faith is that principle of confidence and persuasion about the supernatural supremacy of Jesus with respect to every problem the disciples might face. No doubt a man must wonder if he sees Jesus walk on water. But there is something in their astonishment which betrays a lack of insight and understanding, and ultimately a hard-hearted unbelief. They should have understood more about Jesus from the miracle of the loaves which would have put them on better footing to experience the miracle of walking on water. Perhaps the loaves should have made them see Jesus as the continuation, and even more, the fulfillment of God's revelatory activity in the Exodus, and perhaps even in Creation. In this case, their experience of Jesus walking on water would just be one more exposition of his deity and glory of fulfillment; by this I mean that glory and beauty of Jesus by which he shows himself to be in line with the OT revelation. And if the disciples had understood this, perhaps their first response would have

been, not astonishment and terror, but tranquil trust and worship. Even more, perhaps we must say faith is that whereby disciples must expect glory-revelations of Jesus. Faith is that which perceives the continuity between Jesus and the revelation of Yahweh in the OT, and which subsequently ascribes to Jesus no less glory than to Israel's God. Faith is that which prevents men from the astonishment of terror and delivers them into the freedom of worshipping Jesus for his supernatural glory. Faith is that which sees that all God has promised throughout redemptive history converges in Jesus. All of this requires that such a faith results in complete confidence in Jesus, whatever the trial or deprivation, and a readiness to obey his every direction.

### **APPLICATION**

1. When Mark opens to us the person of Jesus, we should respond with love and worship. We should be overwhelmed at his beauty, power, and excellence. The human heart desperately needs to worship; it was designed to do so. If it doesn't worship God it will worship nature, sports, the human form, money and status, or perhaps skill. We should be filled with a wonder at God revealed in Jesus through each of Jesus' miraculous acts. We should have a deep affection for Christ, a desire to be near him and to arrive at full and final union with him. This affection is different from marriage and romance, though it contains similar elements. Perhaps some soldiers love their superiors because of their nobility, integrity, competence, and justice. Some citizens have certainly loved their political leaders. In both of these examples we come closer perhaps to the nature of love that creatures should feel for their Creator. Probably the best illustration of all is the love of a child for a father. Admiration, trust, and desire for communion are all aspects of this filial love to God, and this application represents the highest act which humans can perform, and indeed the one which they are most obligated to perform: Love to God.

2. Each time we encounter Mark's theme of hard-heartedness and faith failure, we should examine ourselves. One writer remarks how strange it is that people such as



the 12 who were so close to Jesus should at this point fail to arrive at living faith. It is common for people to get just enough Jesus to become inoculated against him. Just because we are near Jesus, even following Jesus to some extent, doesn't guarantee we possess that insight into his person which is necessary for real communion with him. Our fallen nature is intractable in its bent toward ignorance and distrust of God. We have a formidable enemy to overcome if we are ever to arrive at that insight and be saved. So we should examine ourselves; we should keep away from sin which hardens the heart. We should keep our minds focused on Christ and meditate his words and actions to help open our hearts to him. Communion with him in prayer is also necessary, as well as fellowship. We need to ask God specifically to warm and open our hearts to him, to overcome our natural bent away from God. The flipside here is that we need to arrive at real faith in Jesus. That faith is described above under Theology, but the basic point is that we perceive the real identity of Christ as Yahweh and embrace him as Creator and Savior. We come to a restful persuasion about his power to handle every situation we face, even to the point that we cease being surprised when we behold his glorious intervention.