

First Serve

Studies in the Gospel of Mark

Text
Mark 4:21-41

Topic
While the wind whips the sea into a frenzied storm,
Jesus is fast asleep on a pillow in the stern of the boat

Title
"The Wind & the Pillow"

Introduction

There are a couple of things you should never do:

1. One, of course, is to never go in against a Sicilian when death is on the line.
2. The other is to never take a bonka-boat ride out to Apu Island in the Philippines.

A bonka-boat is a hollowed-out log, fixed with an outrigger to stabilize it. It's powered by a lawnmower motor that turns a length of pipe attached to a rusty propeller.

Bear in mind there are no life vests, and no rescue squad of any kind should you get into distress.

It's great if the ocean is like glass - like it was when we cruised over to the island early in the morning.

Later that afternoon, coming back, the water was choppy. Both of the bonka-boats our mission team were in were getting severely beaten. We got separated, and I honestly thought I'd never see the guys in the other boat again. Later I heard how their boat almost capsized, and would have if one of our guys hadn't literally jumped out of the boat to grab the outrigger and use his own body weight to stabilize it.

We barely made it back; I'm not exaggerating. I thought I was gonna die.

I can't help but think of that harrowing boat ride when I read about the disciples of Jesus afraid in the storm.

Their experience in the storm was the second session of a lesson that the Lord was teaching them:

1. First, He encouraged them to take full advantage of opportunities to sow the seed of the Word of God.
2. But then, with the storm, He revealed the opposition they could expect as sowers.

Opportunities still abound. So does opposition.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Get Ready For Opportunities To Be Sowing, and #2 Be Ready For Opposition To Your Sowing.

#1 Get Ready For Opportunities To Be Sowing

(v21-34)

Jesus was revealing to His closest disciples what He called "the mystery of the kingdom of God." The kingdom that was promised the nation of Israel was not a mystery. It permeates their Scriptures. It was an ever-present hope, always on the minds of the Jews.

The mystery being revealed for the first time by Jesus was that there would be a delay in the establishing of the kingdom on the earth. Because the Jewish authorities would reject Jesus as their king, He would return to Heaven without inaugurating the kingdom.

He would, however, return to the earth, in His Second Coming, to fulfill all the promises of a kingdom on the earth, ruled from Jerusalem.

Jesus was thus explaining to the disciples - and, by extension, to us - what would be happening between His two comings.

He told the Parable of the Sower, and we said it was foundational. It established that the main spiritual characteristic of this age in which we live, waiting for Jesus to return, is the preaching of the Gospel to lost men, women, and children.

Listening to the Parable of the Sower, you realize that a lot of people - represented by certain soil-types - were not going to get saved. From one point of view, in fact, it would seem that most people will remain lost.

That's somewhat discouraging on the surface. A sower might have a tendency to get discouraged, to grow weary, in light of the refusals of many to trust Jesus Christ and be saved.

The Lord realizes how prone we are to discouragement. I've found that, even when successful ministry occurs, I can find ways to be discouraged if I'm not careful.

What Jesus does in these next few verses is pause to encourage us to go on sowing.

Mar 4:21 Also He said to them, "Is a lamp brought to be put under a basket or under a bed? Is it not to be set on a lampstand?"

The household "lamp" in first century Israel was a small clay container filled with oil with a wick in it. You wouldn't bother to light it if your intent was to keep its light hidden. No, you'd put it somewhere, like a lampstand, where it could give-off the most light.

Disciples of Jesus are the lamp, and we are called upon to shine in the kingdom of darkness throughout this age.

Mar 4:22 For there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed, nor has anything been kept secret but that it should come to light.

This saying of the Lord's has been taken out of context to strike fear into the hearts of believers. I remember a Gospel tract in the Chic series in which our meeting with Jesus face-to-face in Heaven was portrayed as featuring our lives being played back as a movie for everyone to see and hear. It included every secret, dark, shameful thought we had ever thunk.

Stuff like that might motivate us, for a time, but it attacks the nature and the character of Jesus. It makes us think of our sweet Lord as Someone who wants to embarrass us in front of others.

He doesn't.

In context, which is where we should keep these words, Jesus was encouraging His followers to share the secrets He was revealing to them. After His resurrection, they should bring them into the light as lamps in the spiritual darkness of the world.

The teaching and preaching of God's Word should be simple and straightforward. It should be understandable - on the bottom shelf, as it were, where everyone can access it.

Captain Barbossa's complaint, in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, could be amended to, "There are a lot of long words in there; we're naught but humble Christians."

We want to reveal truth, not conceal it; and we want to do it simply, for everyone to understand.

Mar 4:23 *If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.*"

Your children have ears, and their hearing is better than yours. Often, however, they act in ways that astonish you, as if they didn't hear your warning or your restriction.

Believers are to "hear" what Jesus is saying, in the inspired Word of God, by making a spiritual effort at listening.

That might mean, for you, taking notes; or repetitive reading; or listening to a study more than once.

It might mean reading along with the transcript; or, the opposite, turning all your devices off in order to focus your mind on listening.

Whatever **you** need to do to have "ears to hear," *do it*.

Mar 4:24 Then He said to them, "Take heed what you hear. With the same measure you use, it will be measured to you; and to you who hear, more will be given.

Mar 4:25 For whoever has, to him more will be given; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him."

There's a famous anecdote that pastors use about a minister who keeps teaching the same passage every Sunday for several weeks in a row. Finally one of the members of the church comes to him, to inquire about it, and he says something like, "I'm going to keep teaching it until you start to live it out!"

I doubt that ever really happened, but it illustrates what Jesus was implying in these verses.

It makes sense that God would not give you more-and-more insight into His Word if you're not going to apply it, or share it.

It's a stewardship issue. Jesus wants you to take what He gives you and invest it, not hide it.

Christians sometimes feel dry. They think it's their church - that their pastor isn't doing a particularly good job of teaching.

That can be true. But it is true more often that a person isn't acting upon the truth they've already received.

It's when we feel dry that we experience what we have been taking away. Even the things that used to excite us about God seem dull.

Again - it might be your church, but it's probably you, and me, being hoarders of the truth rather than distributors of it.

Having encouraged us to go on sowing, Jesus tells two quick parables to describe additional characteristics of this age.

Mar 4:26 And He said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground,

Mar 4:27 and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how.

Mar 4:28 For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head.

Mar 4:29 But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

The single, simple teaching here is that the life is in the seed - not with the sower. After it's sown, the farmer can go about his business, live his day-to-day life, and know that the seed will "sprout and grow."

Jesus was reminding His disciples, and us, that the power is in the Word of God. Sow it and let it do its work. Don't lose confidence in it just because you cannot see it in the hearts of those to whom it's been sown.

We need this reminder because we are always being told the church is failing. Everyday, it seems, I see an article on how the church is failing to reach the next generation.

Some people believe it, and begin to recast the seed of the Word in some new manner that they think is more attractive.

While our methods can certainly change, our message never can. Yes, the apostle Paul became "all things to all men," in order to win them to Jesus. But I see that as an attitude adjustment on his part - accepting people where they were at.

I don't think Paul adopted their lifestyles. If he were here today, I doubt he'd dress like a hipster, in girls bluejeans, and start a micro-brewery. But I bet he'd minister to those who did.

Mar 4:30 Then He said, "To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it?"

Mar 4:31 It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth;

Mar 4:32 but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade."

The mustard seed was the smallest seed in first century Israel; but the mustard plant (not the weed we might think of) could grow to a height of many feet.

This one grew to be huge, and we can see in Jesus' description that it featured both *supernatural* and *unnatural* growth.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed ensures us that the mystery phase of the kingdom of God in-between the two comings of Jesus is going to feature phenomenal growth.

Jesus hadn't revealed it yet, but in-between His comings He would be building His church, comprised of all born-again believers from the Day of Pentecost until His Second Coming. It's growth will be nothing short of supernatural. Nothing and no one - not devils or men - can stop it.

With the benefit of hindsight and history, we see the continued supernatural growth of the church.

But we also see something unnatural. There are many groups, and many individuals, who lay claim to being Christians, but are not. A person in the East might think of all Westerners as Christians. They think of all denominations, and sects, as Christian - when we know many are non-Christian cults.

These are the birds in the branches. We know the birds must be bad, they must be evil, because they were agents of Satan in the Parable of the Sower. They can't be whatever we want them to be.

Thus while this parable describes the unstoppable supernatural growth of the church, it does not teach that the church will somehow prepare the world for the return of Jesus, or that we are in the kingdom now.

Mar 4:33 And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it.

Mar 4:34 But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples.

Parables to the multitudes, with explanation to the disciples. Bear in mind a person could go from being just a member of the multitudes to being a disciple.

No one was being denied the forgiveness of their sins. But they must seek after the Lord Himself, and not just His miracles.

Remember the old Dr. Pepper jingle,

*I'm a pepper
He's a pepper
She's a pepper
We're a pepper
Wouldn't you like to be a pepper too?*

Well, we could substitute "sower" for "pepper," and have that rattling around in our brains, reminding us to look for, and take advantage of, any and every opportunity to share the Gospel.

#2 Be Ready
For Opposition To Your Sowing
(v35-41)

We don't need to understand and read Greek or Aramaic, or Hebrew, for that matter, in order to understand God's Word. But every now and then, the proper translation of a word can help us immensely.

Jesus is going to calm a storm at sea by saying, "Peace, be still."

The Greek word translated "be still" literally means *be muzzled*. This is the same command Jesus issued when He addressed demons, which implies that this storm was actually stirred by Satan.

Knowing this was the devil's doing, we can see this episode as a reminder to us that ministry will always be met by demonic opposition of some kind.

Mar 4:35 On the same day, when evening had come, He said to them, "Let us cross over to the other side."

Did you ever, in elementary school, take that test that was really a trick to see if you read the instructions?

The teacher is supposed to really hype how important it is for you to finish all twenty-five questions. But you don't really have enough time to do so.

Nervous you won't finish, you turn over the test and dive right into it - without reading the one-sentence directions on the top.

The directions say, "Answer only questions one and twenty-five, then turn your test in to your teacher."

Most fifth graders miserably fail.

Jesus' direction to His disciples is a kind of test; or at least commentators see it that way. He said to His disciples, "Let us cross over to the other side."

He didn't say, "Let us cross *under* to the bottom of the sea." In other words, they could have had faith to know they would arrive at the opposite shore, as promised, despite the storm.

Mar 4:36 Now when they had left the multitude, they took Him along in the boat as He was. And other little boats were also with Him.

"Other little boats" were involved - boats on which Jesus was not a passenger. If the guys on His boat were terrified, how do you think these other boats were doing?

Make a mental note of the fact "other little boats were also with Him," too, for our next study. As chapter five opens, Jesus lands and immediately faces-off against the man living in tombs possessed by a legion of demons.

Thus this whole scene reads like a D-Day invasion, as Jesus' little flotilla hits the beach and is met by considerable force - only to completely eliminate the opposition.

Mar 4:37 And a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling.

Before we criticize the boys in the boat, we see that they waited until they were taking on water. It seemed they would definitely sink.

I don't want to ruin anyone's promise to you that Jesus won't let you sink, but He just might.

The apostle Paul was in multiple shipwrecks, left floating on the planks of the ships that had broken-up under him. In the Book of Acts he says, during a particularly wicked storm at sea,

Act 27:22 And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship.

Act 27:26 However, we must run aground on a certain island."

Jesus was just as much with him in the water as He was on the deck.

I want us to be ready in case our ship sinks. It can, but that in no way minimizes the love of Jesus.

Jesus is always, always, always, with you in the storm; and that means sometimes in the sea after your boat has disintegrated.

Mar 4:38 But He was in the stern, asleep on a pillow. And they awoke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?"

Ouch! Jesus, full of compassion, is accused of not caring, because He wasn't doing what they thought He should.

Jesus, Who would die on the Cross for them, and everyone else, is accused of being callous to their needs. We do this anytime we question the Lord's love on account of our circumstances.

We talk a lot about suffering because the age in which we live, between the two comings of Jesus, is to be marked by our suffering with patience and perseverance, as a testimony to the grace of God at work in our lives.

I remembered a quote from C.S. Lewis' book on suffering, *The Problem of Pain*. It goes like this: "... pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: **it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.**"

I think that Lewis meant God uses pain and suffering to shout at us, as His megaphone, to get our undivided attention.

While that may be true, and with apologies to Lewis, I think that pain and suffering are a megaphone the Lord hands **us**, for us to shout about His grace while we are afflicted. Paul, in fact, said he boasted in his sufferings.

Has God handed you the megaphone? What are you shouting through it?

Mar 4:39 Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace, be still!" And the wind ceased and there was a great calm.

The wind might suddenly subside naturally, but for the sea to become instantly like glass - well, that's a miracle, and especially noticeable to seasoned fishermen.

As we pointed-out, Jesus spoke to this storm in a way that indicated it was satanic in origin.

The devil cannot be blamed for every bad thing; we live in a fallen world, after all.

But we must be aware that he will do everything and anything to hinder us from sowing the seed of the Word of God.

Our part is to simply press on, to move forward, knowing that the Lord is with us, and will never leave us or forsake us; not on the deck, not in the deep.

Mar 4:40 But He said to them, "Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?"

This is understandable when coupled with His words, "Let us cross *over* to the other side." By faith in His words, they could have known they would - one way or another - reach their destination.

I was thinking how we go out of our way to simulate crazy motion by going to places like Magic Mountain. We have faith that the rides are safe and well-maintained.

Until we see some YouTube video of people hanging upside-down for several hours on some loop roller coaster.

We go on those because we enjoy the ride. Jesus wants us to rejoice in the 'ride' we are on with Him - even through the storm, even in the sea.

Mar 4:41 *And they feared exceedingly, and said to one another, "Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!"*

They were afraid in the storm, but more afraid of Jesus. Was this a proper, submissive, reverential fear of God? Or were they afraid of what they'd signed-up for?

Both are possibilities for disciples, especially as we face opposition for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Christian life isn't war games. It's live-fire, with injuries and casualties. There's friendly-fire, too - but that's for another text to describe.

Besides expecting it, how can we be ready for opposition?

By remembering Who Jesus is; and that, ultimately, He is in charge.

"Even the wind and the sea obey Him." He can keep us from the storm; He can keep us through the storm - even if our boat splinters underfoot.

Take up the megaphone when it is your lot in life to suffer, letting everyone know that God's grace is sufficient.

1Co 15:55 "O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING? O HADES, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY?"

1Co 15:56 The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law.

1Co 15:57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

1Co 15:58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.