

“The Gracious Providence of God”

Mark 4:35–41

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The text for our study will be in Mark 4. I'd like to say Happy New Year and I'm so grateful for some of the great things God has been doing through Briarwood in this past year (2020). At the beginning of a new year I think it's good to slow down and roll the highlight reel to look deliberately at the blessings of God, whether they are done through His redeeming grace in the work of His church or even through common grace through people in the world over as people stood on their balconies singing one to another trying to reduce the physical gap between them and others cheered those who were front line caretakers of those from the pandemic before us. We need to look and see how we can be thankful for the blessings of God throughout. Sometimes in those moments where we deliberately look at the positives God lifts us up and He helps us put things back in proper perspective. He even lets us see and understand His Divine providence in all that He does.

That is what takes place in the passage we will look at in this study. In Mark 4 Jesus is going to replace fear with faith through the Disciples, showing not only them but us that He as God is always at work in every one of our circumstances, using those circumstances to call us deeper in a relationship with Him. Mark 4:35–41 says [35] *On that day, when evening had come, He said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.”* [36] *And leaving the crowd, they took Him with them in the boat, just as He was. And other boats were with Him.* [37] *And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling.* [38] *But He 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?”* [39] *And He awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.* [40] *He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?”* [41] *And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?”*

This is God's holy and inspired Word so let's pay close attention to it so that by His grace and mercy it will now be preached for you.

The Disciples are frantic as they face what appears to be a certain death, alone, with no one to come to the rescue. In their humanity they can't wrap their minds around or believe what is happening, that here is Jesus asleep while they were perishing. But Jesus is about to do more for the Disciples, and I hope He'll do the same for us in this study, for He is about to reveal more of Himself to the Disciples than they have seen before. I pray that Jesus will do that for us today. Jesus is going to use the present distress, the circumstances they are facing in order to enable them to get life in proper perspective and also to enable them to embrace the providence of God.

Let's first consider that idea that faith enables us to see life proper perspective. Right from the start Mark helps us see something of a context, a setting for what is going on and he also lets us know he is writing to us as an eye witness even though he was not in the boat when this took place. So how can you be an eye witness when you weren't even there? Mark is an eye witness due to the source he is using in his Gospel which is Peter who was there. Typical of Peter, he gives some details to Mark that both Matthew and Luke choose to omit in their Gospels. Phrases like “on that day” and “other boats with Him” and “just as He was” show this is an eye witness account and help us get a context for what we are about to look at in this study.

So what was that day? It was on that day that Jesus had been teaching multitudes that had gathered from all the regions around. There was such a large throng that they were pressing in on Jesus so hard, Jesus found He needed to get in a boat and get out to sea a little ways in order to be uninterrupted as He taught and also to be able to be heard by all those who gathered around. What was He teaching? The earlier part of Mark 4 shows us that on that day Jesus began teaching in parables – the parable of the sower and the parable of the mustard seed. He even took time on that day to pull the Disciples aside to help make sure they understood what the parables meant and why He was teaching in parables at all. He told them He was teaching in parables so that those who had eyes and ears of faith may see and understand but those who lack because of their own closed heart, do not have the eyes to see or the ears to hear and they would remain in darkness. So Jesus has had a long day of doing ministry, a day of teaching.

Humanly speaking, perhaps He is tired and you can identify with it when you have had a hard day somewhere along the way. You have put in long hours and yet when you were done with what you thought was the end of your hard day, more was being asked of you. Here Jesus was humanly exhausted at the end of that day and as evening settles in Jesus still says to His Disciples, “Let’s go across to the other side.” That would trigger our thinking to, if He is going across to the other side and He is exhausted at the end of the day, then what is He thinking? He is thinking about more ministry that lies ahead. Jesus had been with His Disciples on the west side of the Sea of Galilee dealing with the Jewish population there. Now it’s time for Jesus to go across to the east side to the area of the Gadarenes, to the Gentiles that were settled there.

Still the crowd kept pressing in and Mark lets us know that they got into other boats. They still wanted to be around Jesus to hear whatever He was going to say. They wanted to see whatever it was that He was going to do. The crowds were not willing to just let Him slip away quietly. Yet just as Jesus got in the boat, being worn out and exhausted, it’s here that we see Mark zoom in for us and isolate just one boat and 13 men.

It’s interesting to me that this sea is called the Sea of Galilee. It’s a very small body of water and it’s 13 miles from its north to south shores. It is seven and a half miles from its east to west shores. It’s below sea level by 680 feet. It’s 680 feet below the Mediterranean Sea. One the east side of it there are rocky crags and Mount Hermon is there which has a 9,002 foot altitude. While these 13 men are in the middle of this sea suddenly we’re told that a furious wind bears down upon them. The Greek word for furious used here is something we would know as a hurricane force wind.

So gale-forced winds came upon them and these veterans, many of whom were fishermen and familiar with the sea, become terrified of what is going on around them. The waves are coming over the side of the boat and about to sink yet here is Jesus sound asleep in the stern of the boat. The Disciples try to rouse Jesus with repeated cries of distress saying “Teacher, don’t you care that we are perishing? Do we mean so little to You that You can just let us die while You continue to sleep?” Fear overwhelmed them and dismay overshadowed their view of their Pastor’s love for them.

This is a good place to step back instead of following on with the narrative because it is here that I want to take the Disciples to task. Humanly speaking, there is no logic in what they just said – don’t You care that we’re going to go down with the ship and You’re asleep? Meaning, we’re going to die and You’re not. Won’t Jesus, as a Man, as the boat sinks going down with them? There is no logic in what they asked, but rather than take them to task I take myself to task because I find that I’m quite human too. Whenever fear stands in the way of faith we quickly lose perspective. Circumstances that surround us become the only reality to us while

what we know to be true about Jesus is pushed to the edges, minimized or completely fades away. When this happens we need Someone that can open our eyes and restore the right perspective, the eternal perspective which is what we need.

This is exactly what Jesus does with His Disciples. Mark 4:39 says [39] *And He awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.* Jesus took action so that His Disciples' faith could be restored as opposed to their frightened rebuking of the Creator, their Master, Jesus rebukes, not the Disciples, but the wind and the sea. Giving the authoritative command 'peace be still' instantly the wind in the Greek could be translated – ran out of gas. It stopped and the sea without another billow laid smooth as glass in a deep, deep calm.

It's here where Mark reveals even an important principle for us. The principle is whenever we only look at the circumstances around us apart from faith, we will lose perspective and be bound by fear. When we look at circumstances through the lens of faith in the Divine providence of God, we're free to live life in proper perspective and grow deeper in faith still. Fear crowds out faith. Let's consider for a moment how this faith enables us to embrace this providence of God.

Turning to His Disciples, Jesus calls them to greater faith simply by saying "*Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?*" (Mark 4:40). Loving them too much to leave them where they were with their faith waylaid by fear, Jesus calls them out. Literally the Greek would say "Why are you being such cowards? Do you still have no faith in Me?" Implied in that Jesus could be saying to them as the Disciples are processing this and reasoning this out, 'do you still not believe after all I've said and done with you?' Jesus' words are still echoing in the minds of the Disciples as they reflect, not only on the miracle but the words Jesus just said and then Mark gives us their response.

Mark 4:41 says [41] *And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?"* It's here where some knowledge of the original language is very helpful. In Mark 4:40 we see the concept of fear that was crowding out faith but Greek word for fear in that verse is more of a fear of timidity or a calendar response to circumstantial things going on around you. In Mark 4:41 the word used here for fear points to something else entirely. The wrong fear, false fear, the fear of circumstances had been replaced by a clear understanding of who God is. They are slap-jawed at this Man who can speak and all creation obeys and they are overwhelmed with a great fear but this time it is the fear of the Lord.

At times we take the phrase, the fear of the Lord, and want to relegate it down to just reverential awe. Yes, it does include a reverential awe of who God is, but here Mark is helping us understand it is still so much more. These Disciples that had been with Jesus day after day are realizing God in flesh is so much more than we have ever understood before. Who is a Man like this who can speak and nature obeys? Yet He is a Man like this who will allow us who are made in His image, to rebel and resist what He tells us to do. Who is this Man?

Mark, at the end of this passage takes the fear of the Lord and then leaves a question dangling unanswered. It's as though he is deliberating saying even to us that we have to try and answer this question for ourselves – who is this Man, who is so much more than the little box of pre-conceived notion we put Him in? I love that we are a covenantal church and our children are here with us Sunday after Sunday but there is also somewhat of a risk in that because even as we come week after week being taught so carefully from God's Word, we can start to see Jesus as Someone commonplace, rather than being afraid of everything we see Him to be.

There's a proper place for the fear of the Lord, in fact, that should be our only response when we see the Divine providence of God in action – our response should be one of fear of the Lord. Here, Jesus is working purposely in a sovereign way when He initiates the crisis that the Disciples face. He was just as sovereign when He calmed the storm while humanly asleep, as when He calmed the storm when the Disciples were panicked. That helps us I hope as we are looking back on 2020 and looking even further back than that as we look at the sum total of our lives with every blessing we have received and every challenge that we have faced – God has been in control and that brings us to the takeaway for this study.

Everything that we experience in this life His sent by the gracious hand of God with one purpose and that is to increase our faith in Him. Everything here is all things, things for which we could be immediately grateful because God sent them our way and things quite panderly might say if we're honest, 'I'd rather not sign up for that one because of the difficulty it will bring.' Yet they are for one purpose and that is to increase our faith in Him. This truth remains constant even as we reflect back on last year. We should be careful not to be too quick to put what has gone on in 2020 in the rearview mirror. I think God intends for us to reflect on 2020 and the sum total of our lives in order that we might understand Romans 8:28 which says *[28] And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* No, it's not all things are good but all things work together for good.

Paul goes on to say in Romans 8:32, *[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?* All things that happen to Jesus while He was on earth were not what we would call good – a crucifixion is not good, but it was eternally very good. He was crucified so that we in faith could be made right with God. We find peace with God through Jesus Christ, the Son.

Even now as we're preparing our hearts for the Lord's Supper we evaluate how God is working in our lives. At times He makes His path for our lives very plain but other times we don't see Him at work at all because He is working entirely behind the scenes. Will we choose to remind ourselves and will we continue to believe that God is working always for His glory and for our good? We do have the question to answer – who is this Man? Is He your Savior, your Lord? Has He brought you to a place where He has given you the gift of faith and you by faith have seen everything in right perspective and you now are following Him? If not, the opportunity remains still.

If you are a brother or sister in Christ following the Lord, but you are looking back on those events in your life, are you trusting Him still by faith and counting them all for good, even those things that are not good, will you count them for good right now as you seek to serve Him? The English Presbyterian Puritan John Flay puts it this way; 'The providence of God is like Hebrew words, it can only be read backwards.' The Danish theologian and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrestled with it in this manner saying "We live life forward but we only understand it backwards." By faith, I hope to encourage you this year to look back on the year to every blessing and every challenged that you faced and see what God in His providence is doing. Trust Him for He is at work in your life and mine drawing us deeper in faith with Him. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, we ask that You would indeed do that work in each of our hearts, in each of our lives. Help us Lord that we might trust You and pursue You farther still. Take every circumstance that You have ordained for each one of us and use those circumstance Lord, in such a way that we

see more of who You are and that we are overwhelmed at the enormity of who You are. By seeing You clearly we are equipped to serving You well. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear that we might have faith that takes us deeper still, in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Power Point

I. Faith Enables Us to See Life in Proper Perspective.

II. Faith Enables Us to Embrace the Providence of God.

Life Takeaway

Everything we experience in this life is sent by the gracious hand of God with one purpose—to increase our faith in Him.