

# Mark – The First Gospel

---

015 – Loaves to Stones – Mark 6:45-56

All outlines, audio recording of discussions, and works referenced may be accessed and viewed at <http://markthefirstgospel.blogspot.com/> .

## First Thoughts

The passage for this time consists of two parts. The first part is another story of the disciples, out on the Sea, in a storm. Although it may seem like a separate story, it should be read as the second part of the previous “feeding” story. The two parts are tied by the use of “loaves.”<sup>1</sup> The second part is a summary text of Jesus and his disciples’ most recent mission. It also acts as a transition to the next set of texts.

What are some of the unifying themes found in these texts that tie together with earlier passages? The question, “Who is Jesus?” is one of them. Another is the theme of faith and unbelief. A third is the parable of the sower/seeds.

## The Storm

*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. 46 And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. 47 And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. 48 And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, 49 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. (ESV)*

The large crowd has had their physical needs met. The miracle (at least in Mark) is only known to the disciples, but maybe the crowd has some questions and they suspect some answers... It is now late afternoon (probably). The crowd will have to begin their journeys home now, or camp here for the night.

---

<sup>1</sup> *UBC: Mark, 6:45-52.* “Mark ties this incident closely to the preceding account of the feeding of the five thousand by noting in 6:52 that the disciples’ fearful collapse here was caused by their failure to understand that the feeding miracle revealed Jesus’ true significance and power. Since Mark thus ties together these two incidents, it is likely that he wants his reader to see them both as complementary revelations of Jesus. This means that this sea miracle is another manifestation of the divine significance of Jesus’ person and not just a miracle story.”

## Discussion

1. What reason(s) might Jesus have for sending the disciples away so abruptly?<sup>2 3</sup>
2. Bethsaida is located at the north end of the Sea of Galilee, on the east side, the Gentile side.
3. When Jesus prays, it is often away from the crowds.<sup>4</sup>
4. Notice the sequence: Jesus “sees” the disciples struggling in the middle of the night in the storm. Jesus goes to them at the fourth watch, near dawn, and walks on the water. Jesus does not immediately go out to rescue the disciples. Why might that be?
5. What can be said of the contrast between the disciples struggling and Jesus walking on water?
6. What is meant by the phrase, “He meant to pass by them”?<sup>5</sup>
7. What about Jesus causes the disciples to fear?<sup>6</sup>
8. What is missing in Mark is Peter asking to walk on the water.
9. What significant concepts is Jesus communicating through his words, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid”?<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> *NICNT: Mark, 6:45-46.* “The abruptness with which Jesus constrained the disciples to return to their boat and directed them to Bethsaida Julias in the territory of Herod Philip suggests a crisis which is unexplained in the Marcan narrative. The wilderness plays a prominent role, however, in the several messianic uprisings of the first century, and Jn. 6:14 f. states that the people recognized Jesus as the promised eschatological Prophet (cf. Mk. 6:14 f.) and determined to proclaim him king. The tension of messianic excitement was dangerously in the air after the meal in the desert. The hurried dismissal of the disciples prevented them from adding fuel to the fire by revealing to the people the miraculous character of the evening meal. Jesus remained to pacify and dismiss the unruly crowd... This analysis is confirmed when the reference to Jesus in prayer is seen in the context of Mark's structure... In each case it is night and Jesus finds himself in a moment of crisis prompted by the enthusiasm of the crowds or the impending passion.”

<sup>3</sup> *Feasting: Mark, location 6741.* “Going to the other side in Mark's language means going to Gentile territory. It means going to the unknown, going to the foreign, going to the other side of humanity. No wonder the disciples were made, or as the Greek word more strongly suggests, forced to go.”

<sup>4</sup> *Reading Mark, 6:31-56.* “This is the second time that the Markan Jesus withdraws for private prayer (cf. 1:35). The portrayal of Jesus as a person of prayer establishes his dependence upon God and contributes to the defense of Jesus and the Christian miracle workers against the charge of practicing magic. When Apollonius of Tyana was accused of practicing magic because he had successfully stopped a plague at Ephesus, he defended himself by explaining that he had merely prayed to Hercules to stop the plague (Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 8. 7. 9). A magician conjures the gods with spells, but a religious person entreats them with prayers. This distinction may look like hairsplitting to Mark's modern readers, but an ancient audience would have recognized it as a legitimate defense.”

<sup>5</sup> *Reading Mark, 6:31-56.* “It soon becomes apparent, however, that without Jesus' leadership the disciples are not going to make it to gentile territory; again they are meeting with opposition, as in 4:35-41. Seeing this, the Markan Jesus again demonstrates his superiority over the hostile sea power by striding across the sea, an activity attributed to God in Job 9:8 and Isa 43:16. His intent was to walk ahead of them-to lead them, like a good shepherd, to their destination (cf. Exod 33:2; 12-17; Ps 23:2b; Isa 40:11d). However, the disciples do not recognize him and cry out in fear.”

<sup>6</sup> *NICNT: Mark, 6:48-50.* “The disciples reacted to Jesus' appearance with terror, convinced that they had encountered a water spirit. The popular belief that spirits of the night brought disaster is illustrated by a tradition preserved in the Talmud: ‘Rabbah said, Seafarers told me that the wave that sinks a ship appears with a white fringe of fire at its crest, and when stricken with clubs on which is engraven, ‘I am that I am, Yah, the Lord of Hosts, Amen, Amen, Selah,’ it subsides.’”

<sup>7</sup> *Reading Mark, 6:31-56.* “Continuing the imagery of the new exodus, the narrator has Jesus identify himself with the self-designation of Yahweh, ‘I am’ (Exod 3:14, Is 41:4, 43:10-11). Thus the author of Mark provides the audience with a definitive answer to the question raised by the disciples in the previous sea- rescue story: ‘Who

10. Jesus gets into the boat; the wind ceases; the disciples are amazed. However, Mark writes that this amazement is due to the disciples not understanding about the loaves. What is Mark saying about the Jesus and his disciples at this point?<sup>8 9 10</sup>
11. The *Complete Jewish Bible* translates 6:52 as follows: “for they did not understand about the loaves; on the contrary, their hearts had been made stone-like.” How might this relate to the parables of chapter four? “Hearts were hardened” is a phrase that is used in the OT; e.g., Pharaoh.<sup>11</sup>
12. Although Mark does not include the specifics of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness (and I may be reading more into the text than is there), I find it interesting that loaves-stone pair is found here. What might be its message? (E.g., Jesus was tempted to turn literal stones into literal bread, but perhaps his entire ministry is about turning metaphorical stones into bread...)

## Healing, But No Teaching

<sup>53</sup> *When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored to the shore.* <sup>54</sup> *And when they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognized him<sup>55</sup> and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was.* <sup>56</sup> *And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well. (ESV)*

These sets of verses acts as summary of ministry events earlier and a transition to the next set of stories. The very next section deals with the topic of ritual purity.<sup>12</sup> This is followed by a healing of a non-Jewish girl. Jesus travels from Jewish territory into Gentile. Jesus feeds the four-thousand in Gentile territory. Another boat trip is narrated, and another question about

---

then is this?’ (4:41). The promise of deliverance is reinforced by an echo of Deutero-Isaiah's ‘Don't be afraid’ (Is 43:10, 43; 45:18; 51:2). Sadly, none of this provides clarification for the disciples, who remain ‘utterly astounded.’”  
<sup>8</sup> *Reading Mark*, 6:31-56. “Worse yet, the narrator informs the audience that, like Jesus' opponents (3:5) and ‘those outside’ (4:10-12, alluding to Isa 6:9-10), their hearts have been hardened. Despite their having been chosen and sent out on a successful mission, despite their having just participated in Jesus' own miraculous ministry, the disciples seem to be in danger of becoming outsiders.”

<sup>9</sup> *NICNT: Mark*, 6:51-52. “Mark alone explains that they had failed to understand about the loaves and that their hearts were hardened (verse 52; cf. Ch. 8:17). The disciples certainly realized that the multitude had been fed with five loaves and two fish, but they had failed to grasp that this event pointed beyond itself to the secret of Jesus' person. Because they were not truly open to the action of God in Jesus they had missed the significance of the miracle of the loaves for them, and saw only ‘a marvel.’ That is why they displayed not confidence and joy in Jesus' unexpected presence but faithless panic.”

<sup>10</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, location 6833. “In this story the disciples do not understand that Jesus himself is the metaphorical key to the feeding miracle. He is the bread of life sitting in a boat with them.”

<sup>11</sup> *NICNT: Mark*, 6:51-52. “In tracing this lack of understanding to ‘hardness of heart’ Mark indicates that at this stage in Jesus' ministry the disciples are not essentially different from his opponents, who also fail to recognize his unique character and exhibit hardness of heart (cf. Chs. 3:5; 10:5).”

<sup>12</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, location 7018. “The ‘fringe’ on Jesus’ garment probably refers to the blue tassel that Jewish males were expected to have on the corners of their cloaks (Num. 15:38–40), which would indicate Jesus’ careful observance of Jewish law (a detail that provides a transition to the next episode in Mark’s Gospel: a discussion about rabbinic legal traditions with Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem, 7:1).”

bread/loaves is raised. A blind man is given sight in stages. Jesus asks his disciples, “Who am I?”<sup>13</sup>

## Discussion

13. Instead of Bethsaida, they end up on the same side as they started – the western, Jewish side.
14. In contrast to the reaction of the disciples on the sea during the night, the people come to Jesus.
15. What is curious about this summary is that unlike in earlier texts, there is no mention of teaching by Jesus – only healing. What does this observation say about the people and about Jesus?<sup>14 15</sup>
16. What does the manner of healing reveal about the peoples’ ideas about Jesus?<sup>16</sup>

## Summary

Christians frequently perform service ministries as a way to open people to (literally) hearing the gospel – a way to get people to see that Christians aren’t all that strange and to get people to be comfortable coming to a church. But is that proper motivation? Maybe compassion, and compassion alone, is the only motivation that is proper and necessary.

- a. The disciples expected Jesus to look one particular way. When they saw him walking on the sea, it was unexpected, leading to fear. What lesson might this have for us?<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> *Reading Mark*, 6:31-56. “This series of three episodes repeats the pattern seen throughout the Gospel in which Jesus’ ministry has three components: teaching, healing, and domination of the demonic powers. The pervasive image throughout this series is the Jewish expectation of the eschatological shepherd who will feed, heal, and lead his flock to safety through watery chaos and threatening wilderness. The next section of the Gospel redefines religious purity in a way that will mean radical changes in the ethnic make- up of this flock.”

<sup>14</sup> *UBC: Mark*, 6:53-56. “This is another summary account of Jesus’ ministry (like earlier examples in 1:39; 3:7-12), only this summary makes no reference to Jesus teaching or exorcising demons but concentrates on his healings... The attitude of the people is an almost superstitious reverence for Jesus as a wonder-worker, including the idea that even his clothing contained healing power (6:56; cf. 5:28)... Mark’s attitude toward the popular notoriety of Jesus as a wonderworker is that Jesus did indeed do such works but that the crowd’s perception of Jesus was all too shallow and incomplete by the standards of the Christian gospel.”

<sup>15</sup> *NICNT: Mark*, 6:56. “The works of Jesus appear to be an epiphany of divine power and the people treat him as a miracle worker or divine man whose power is released through touch. In this connection the absence of any reference to preaching or teaching activity is significant. The people are not prepared for Jesus’ proclamation of the word, and the public ministry interrupted in Ch. 6:31 has not been resumed. They understand only that power is channeled through his person. Jesus patiently bears with their limited insight and graciously heals those who reach out to him from the bed of affliction.”

<sup>16</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, location 6998. “Second, this passage invites us to consider the etiology of disease and the mode of healing in antiquity. Ordinary folks in Mark’s world assumed that everyone had a personal demon, daimonion, that regulated his or her physical and mental health. One usually felt in ‘good spirits’ and was not even aware of the demon inside. However, every so often that demon could turn (temporarily or permanently) on its host, or be forced out by the invasion of a bad demon. In that case, the demon’s presence was acutely felt and the person became ill. Poultices, herbs, drugs, and other folk remedies could be applied and were sometimes effective. The demon was soothed, and subsequently so was its human host. However, if that did not work, more drastic measures may have been needed. An exorcist could be summoned to apply his or her skills in casting out the evil demon and inviting a benevolent spirit to take its place.”

<sup>17</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, location 6698. “Their failure of theological imagination is complete. Rather than understanding the epiphany of God-in-Christ represented by Jesus as he passed by, they feared a demonic attack of some sort.

- b. The disciples were fine (more or less) with ministry to others and leading them to Christ. But when it came to trusting for themselves, they experienced catastrophic failure. What about us?<sup>18</sup>
- c. The sea and storm is more than just a physical obstacle. It is a metaphorical obstacle that prevents the disciples from moving from zone of comfort to the unknown. What about us?<sup>19</sup>
- d. In what ways might modern Christians' hearts be hardened?<sup>20</sup>
- e. Mark's narratives include literal parables, but many of the stories can also be taken as *parabolic*.<sup>21</sup>
- f. "One might wonder which is more troubling, the presence of Jesus or his absence."<sup>22</sup>
- g. We usually expect faithfulness to be found in the ones who are "spiritual" and "religious." But that is not necessarily the case.<sup>23</sup>
- h. The type or degree of faith, nor a person's future intent, has no bearing on whether or not Jesus chooses to heal and minister to the peoples' needs. The only thing that matters is the Jesus has compassion for all who express their needs.<sup>24</sup>

---

Having followed him more and less faithfully in the preceding days, they had grown accustomed to the 'normal' form of his presence among them, teaching and healing the people. But in their own situation of distress, they were unable to 'see' his encouraging manifestation of the divine presence on their behalf."

<sup>18</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, location 6705. "Thereby, they pointed out how faithful followers of Jesus can be quick to mediate Jesus' healing presence to others while failing to receive it for themselves."

<sup>19</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, 6747. "A church that has been very comfortable in its cultural context is finding the culture around it radically shifting... The age of the culturally established Christian church is gone. The church is, again, sent by its Lord to cross over to the other side. There are adverse winds blowing against the church on this crossing, and the crossing is over 'the sea'—'the deep,' in biblical language—the symbol of threatening chaos."

<sup>20</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, location 6770. "Remember, the Pharisees' hearts are also hardened. Mark describes what that hardening is about (3:1–6). The Pharisees with hardened hearts are sure they know where the boundaries of the community of God's kingdom lie—in their case, with those keeping the law, particularly the law of the Sabbath. Can it be that the disciples' hearts are also hardened because they are so sure they know where the boundaries of the kingdom lie?"

<sup>21</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, location 6816. "Some have described Jesus' parables as riddles, which makes sense in the context of this story. His parables were not intended solely to make an ethical point (though they sometimes did). Often they were open-ended riddles that invited students inside the parable in order to delve more deeply into their own souls. Parables were portals that opened into a new level of religious consciousness."

<sup>22</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, location 6865.

<sup>23</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, location 6911. "Already, allusion has been made to the contrast between the disciples' slowness to trust the calming presence of God in their experience on the sea (vv. 45–52) and the villagers' readiness to place the sick near Jesus. In this way, Mark reminds us that faithfulness is not always of the authorized sort."

<sup>24</sup> *Feasting: Mark*, locations 6965, 6996. "They are not interested in following. They are interested in getting: getting what they want, getting relief from their suffering, getting deliverance from their affliction. We do not know if those who sought Jesus out in Gennesaret for healing also intended to join his movement. We only know that they wanted something. That is what happens when the people all around sense there is a divine presence in their midst, even if those whom the Son of God has called to be his community do not understand who he is... That he is an effective teacher and compassionate human being is beside the point. Their plea is, 'What can you do for me? Now!' By the end of the Gospel, the crowd will have forgotten his good deeds and will turn against him"