

Mark 6:31-56, The Apostles' Maiden Mission: Debrief
45-56, Boat Trip and Miracles
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A. Overview

1. Recall basic structure of the Boat Trips:

- a) Opening: usually focuses on teaching and crowds; the trips often start to escape from the press. *The only time this is a miracle is ch.8, which balances the unexpected lack of a miracle at the destination.* Here: 1-31, the apostles' initial mission.
- b) Travel out: mostly by sea. Either this or the return trip is usually a time of special instruction for the disciples. *Only exception is ch. 7, which has no instruction in either, and is also not in a boat!* Here: 32, the outbound trip is uneventful.
- c) At the destination: usually a miracle, *except in ch. 8, where the Pharisees ask for one and the Lord expressly refuses!* Here: 33-44, feeding the 5000.
- d) Travel back. Here: 45-53, instruction on trusting the Lord (today's lesson).
- e) Closing: always some sort of miracle. Here: 54-56, flocking of multitudes to be healed.

B. 45-52, The Return Trip

As in most of the five-part trip accounts, at least one of the trips is instructional, and this is the one. This is their only boat ride without him. The two in 4-5, and the outbound ride in 6, were with him. Notice two sets of verbs: one expressing what he does in caring for them, and one expressing their lack of faith toward him.

1. His care for them

- a) 45, He constrains them to set out alone, thus setting the stage for the rest of the episode.
 - 1) They probably think little of his request. They know he likes to spend time alone in prayer (1:35-37), and they can easily row back the few miles back across the lake.
 - 2) But the sequel shows that this journey will turn terrifying for them. He is putting them in a situation to show them their complete lack of strength, so that they will learn to trust him.
 - 3) *Application:* To be a believer is to enroll in the Lord's school of faith, and there are lots of homework assignments, pop quizzes, and hard exams. Don't join the

class if you can't handle the work!

- b) 46, He withdraws to private prayer.
 - 1) Here is the true solitude, the true vacation. Even when people crowd into every moment of the day, we can still be refreshed by spending time with the Lord.
 - 2) A good chance he wants to pray for them. The only other time in Mark that he withdraws to pray (1:35-37) immediately follows another indication of the disciples' limitations.
 - 3) Even now, his ministry toward us is one of prayer: Rom. 8:27; Heb. 7:25; 1 John 2:1. No need to ask Mary or one of the saints to pray for us; the Son of God himself is our intercessor.
- c) 47-48a, He saw them. "When even was come," about the time of sunset, in the last glimmer of twilight he can see them struggling against the wind.
 - 1) Cf. Gen. 16:7-14, Hagar's experience of the God who sees us. Beerlahairoi, "the well of the Living One who sees me."
 - 2) Cf. Rev. 2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15, "I know thy works" and circumstances.
 - 3) Lesson: We are never out of his sight. No matter how desolate the circumstances, he sees us and understands our plight.
- d) 48b, He came to them.
 - 1) "About the fourth watch." Mark follows the Roman custom of dividing the night into four 3-hour watches: 6-9, 9-12, 12-3, 3-6. Thus this is at least 3AM; if they set sail around 6 the previous evening, they have been rowing against the wind for nine hours, and going nowhere!
 - 2) Lesson: Just when things seem most desperate, he comes to us. Cf. His appearance to the two on the Road to Emmaus, Luke 24:15; John 14:18, "I will not leave you comfortless; I will come to you."
- e) 48c, He "was intending to pass by them." He does not force himself on them, but gives the appearance of passing by. The lesson is not over.
- f) 50, He spoke to them.
 - 1) The first and third sayings are virtually synonymous. "Be of good courage" is one common LXX translation of the

Hebrew expression, "Fear not," while the third saying is another.

- 2) Between these two he says, "It is I," lit. "I am." Here as elsewhere in the gospels, the Lord delights to take to himself the sacred name of YHWH (Exod 3:6; cf. John 8; 18:5,6).
- 3) When the Lord himself tells us not to fear, in all the express authority of his deity, surely we ought not to fear! This is the consistent message of all the Scriptures.
- g) 51, He joined them in the boat. How much more precious the promise we have today, Heb. 13:5,6, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee." Yet how often we feel like the disciples, alone on a stormy sea, exerting all our energy and yet getting nowhere.
- h) Summary: Though the Lord may sometimes leave us feeling alone to test and instruct us, we should know that he is aware of our state, praying for us, comforting us through his Word, and in fact present with us.

2. Their lack of faith

- a) 49,50, They saw him, but misidentified him, and cried out in terror. It was the middle of the night, they were tired, the wind was blowing, and a human figure walking on the waves must have seem terrifying. Perhaps we can excuse them for not recognizing him, under the circumstances. But by preserving this episode for us in the Scriptures, the HS wants to emphasize to us that the Lord's promises of his presence and protection hold true in the most threatening circumstances, and what we fear most may in fact prove to be his means of delivering us.
- b) 51, Even when they recognized him, they were greatly amazed and wondered. They have not fully come to grips with who he is, and have hardly progressed beyond 4:40,41.
- c) 52, Mark gives two explanations for their lack of faith.
 - 1) They did not consider the loaves. Had they done so, they would have realized he was amply able to care for them; even after they had eaten their part, the twelve baskets may have been with them even at that moment in the boat. How often in Scripture, the Lord's past blessings to us are the motivation for us to trust him in the future.
 - 2) Their heart was hardened.
 - a> Not the usual OT expression, as applied to Pharaoh in Exodus, or to the Pharisees in Mark 10:5. This one means "calloused."

- b> Appears again in 8:17, on another boat ride; there, "have ye your heart yet hardened?" suggests that this is a natural condition that they are expected to outgrow. Callous is a good image; if you remove the irritation and apply oil or ointment, you can soften it.
- c> Yet this can be serious; cf. 3:5, where it characterizes the Pharisees at the start of the Lord's ministry. Apparently this hardness can either be wiped away by the Lord's revelation, or reinforced until it ripens into the other form.
- d> Prov 4:23: "Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life." Expose it often to the Word of God; submit it to the Spirit in prayer; do not irritate it with ungodly thoughts from the media.

3) Conversely, if we DO keep our hearts sensitive to the Lord, remembrance of his past blessings will carry us through times of difficulty.

C. 53-56, Return and Healings

Constrast the multitudes with two other groups.

1. This is only one of several times in Mark when people flock to the Lord seeking healing. These episodes are regularly accompanied by another theme: explicit rejection by the Jewish rulers. *possible exceptions: 1:32,33; 4:1*
 - a) 2:1ff, in Capernaum, followed by scribes' criticism in 2:7.
 - b) 3:7-12, preceded and (22) followed by scribal criticism.
 - c) 5:24ff, followed (6:1ff) by rejection in Nazareth.
 - d) Here, followed by criticism from the Pharisees (7:1ff).
2. Thus these episodes emphasize to our attention the first great division among the soils in ch. 4.
 - a) Roadside, the seed plucked up by Satan: the Jewish leaders, who pick at the Lord and constantly try to avoid recognizing who he is.
 - b) Rocky soil, initial enthusiasm that quickly withers: these multitudes, enthusiastic, but only seeking their own benefit; followers but not disciples.
 - c) Good soil that bears fruit: the disciples, those who commit themselves to the Lord and learn from him.
3. These enthusiasts are also different from the disciples, but in a curious way.

- a) 54 and 33 are the only two places in Mark where people are said to "know" Jesus (*epignoskw* "recognize"); this is just what the disciples did NOT do on the lake in 6:49. Though the people's faith is shallow, they know that the Lord can help them materially. In fact, John tells us that they were on the verge of making him king after the feeding of the 5000. The disciples, though, seem strangely reluctant to trust him for material benefits.
- b) Ironic that those who trust him most deeply in spiritual matters should be least reliant on him for material things, and vice versa! Cf. 1 John 5:11-15.
- c) Whatever the underlying reason for this paradox, we must be aware of it and seek to trust the Lord in all things.