



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

“Have You Still No Faith?”

Mark 4.35-41

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A Faith That Would Not Shrink

Around 155-160 AD, authorities in Smyrna, where one of the seven Asian churches was located (Rev 2-3), conducted an intensive persecution against Christians. They killed several disciples, in cruel ways, but neither the officials nor the crowds were satisfied. Polycarp, an aged and influential saint, remained at large, in “a small country house not far from the city . . . with a few companions, doing nothing else night and day except praying for everyone and for the churches throughout the world.”¹

The proconsul pressured Quintus, a Christian recently arrived from Phrygia, to take the oath of allegiance and offer incense to Caesar as Lord, after which he gave up Polycarp’s location. After his arrest the proconsul tried to reason with him. What harm could there be “in saying ‘Caesar is Lord’, and offering incense. . .?” As the proconsul threatened him, Polycarp kept refusing to relent, though at one point he did consent to follow the order to renounce the “atheists” (ἄθεος, *atheos*) a term applied to the Christians by their enemies. He did not really surrender, however; instead he motioned to the crowd and said, “Away with the atheists!” Finally, after failing to convince him to swear to Caesar, the proconsul said, “I will have you consumed by fire, since you despise the wild beasts, unless you change your mind” (citations from *MPoly* 8.2; 9.2; 11.2).

Polycarp’s confession in the face of the pressure has inspired believers ever since. “For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” (*MPoly* 9.3).

Irenaeus, another early Christian leader who reported that he had seen him when he was a boy, also wrote of Polycarp’s martyrdom, adding the detail that he had known and been instructed by the apostles.² That matters because, according to Christian tradition, all were persecuted and all but one of the surviving eleven, plus James the Lord’s brother, were martyred.

Peter—crucified
Andrew—crucified
Matthew—sword
John of Zebedee—natural
James of Alphaeus—crucified
Philip—crucified

Simon—crucified
Thaddaeus—killed by arrows
James, brother of Jesus—stoned
Thomas—spear thrust
Bartholomew—crucified
James of Zebedee—sword³

Examples of believers like Polycarp and others prompted T. R. Glover's observation that the early church overcame Rome because the Christians out-thought, out-lived, and out-died the pagans. Relative to the latter, he wrote, "The pagan noticed the new fortitude in the face of death" and then noted that many responded by inquiring about and then accepting the faith.⁴

Do you and I have a faith that will not shrink? Like Polycarp? Like the apostles? That question might frighten us to inaction. But remember: the apostles did not always have such faith either.

More Than a Lake Crossing

Our text serves as a transition between sections of Mark's account, but it is more than that.

- It follows the parables, told to give the disciples the secret of the kingdom (4.11): when they sowed the seed (word), God would do great things (4.1-9, 13-32, esp. 26-32).
- 4.35-41 records the first of two crossings of the Sea of Galilee (in multiple boats, v. 36), from west to east (5.1-20, esp. 1, 20), and back again (5.21-43, esp. 21).⁵
- Three miracles show Jesus' authority over demons (5.1-20; again: Mark 1.32-34, 39; 3.15, 22; later: 6.13; 7.26, 29-30; 9.38; 16.9, 17), ritual uncleanness (5.25-34; cf. Lev 15:15-28), and death (5.21-24, 35-43; also an uncleanness issue — Lev 22.4; Num 19.11).

In Mark 4 and 5,⁶ the King whose secret the disciples were learning acts boldly and decisively (4.35-41) and then shows the answer to their question, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4.41). Notice some details, in the order in which they appear.

1. Jesus modeled a calm faith as the storm raged (vv. 36-38). He had something in his life the disciples lacked: he knew who he was and that his Father cared (cf. Matt 11.27).
2. We understand why the disciples would ask if he cared about their fate (v. 38); notice that he did care for them in their crisis (v. 39).
3. When he "rebuked" it, Jesus showed his authority over the storm (v. 39). "Rebuked" translates ἐπιτιμάω (*epitimaō*), to express strong disapproval, censure, or punish.⁷ The winds and sea were malevolent forces in this situation (v. 37). Jesus ruled over them, too.
4. Jesus called his disciples from timidity (δειλός, *deilos*) (v. 40). The word is used elsewhere in Matt 8.26 (parallel to Mark 4) and Rev 21.8.
 - a. Another form of it (δειλία, *deilia*) is used in 2 Tim 1.7, and the verb (δειλιάω, *deiliaō*) is used in John 14.27.
 - b. *Deilos* had to do with being cowardly or timid, and is associated with a lack of mental or moral strength (BDAG, 215).
 - c. Great faith begins with a clear and disciplined view of two realities: God rules and through him great things are possible.
5. The disciples responded with fear and an inquiring faith (v. 41).
 - a. Literally, v. 41 reads, "And they were being fearful [with] great fear" (ἐφοβήθησαν φόβον μέγαν; *ephobēthēsan phobon megan*).
 - b. This word means [1] "to be in an apprehensive state, be afraid, the aor. oft. in the sense become frightened," but also [2] "to have a profound measure of respect for, (have) reverence, respect, w. special ref. to fear of offending" (BDAG, 1063).
 - c. Probably in this case they were more afraid than reverent. But their question shows at least the beginning of reverence and respect.

- d. Reverent fear is not faith's opponent, but its foundation, indicating the full and healthy respect we need for God in order to attempt great things.

Faith That Attempts Great Things

It could be that nothing has done more to hold back God's people than the hesitancy to attempt great things for God, to chart a course and "go for it" in righteous fear of the Lord and under his guidance. We are too often content to maintain the status quo, to do enough to get by. To really step out is—and has always been (see Num 13-14)—daunting to the point of frightening, but it has always gone hand in hand with great works of faith.

This does not mean that daring to dream, thinking outside the box, embracing good change, charting a bold course and really going after it, not to mention hard work are unnecessary. The people who comprised the first century church had a big dream, were bold, and effected change as they preached, solved problems, and launched out in faith.

But always remember that the foundation of great faith is God. Thus, our excuses, delays, lack of urgency for the great task at hand, and other detractors must be as things that pull us away from boldness in faith. Too often, timidity hinders us from dealing with life problems, seeking spiritual growth, or striving to move God's church forward.

Fortunately, we can find examples that inspire us. For instance, in conjunction with the 70th anniversary commemoration of D-Day in France (June 6, 1944), Jim "Pee Wee" Martin, a 93-year-old D-Day vet who had parachuted in on June 5 did it again, reliving his jump of seventy years before. But the real story is why he did it. "I just want to show people that you don't have to sit and die just because you get old. Keep doing things."⁸

With great purpose and faith, each church should dream, think outside the box, be open to good change, chart a bold course, and do the work necessary to discern where we are and how to move forward. No "magic" is going to "just happen."

"Have you still no faith?" Jesus asked. Is the faith we have the kind the disciples would eventually grow, the kind that dreams big and acts boldly, trusting God to enable great things?

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Notes

¹ *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 5.1, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd edition, Michael W. Holmes, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 307.

² Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.3.4, in Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. *The Apostolic Fathers With Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, Vol. I of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Accordance electronic ed. New York: Christian Literature Company, 1885.

³ As cited in Josh McDowell & Bill Wilson, *He Walked Among Us* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1988), 118-119.

⁴ T. R. Glover, *The Jesus of History* (New York: Association Press, 1917; New York Public Library reprint), 202.

⁵ *ESV Study Bible* designates 4.35-5.43 as one section.

⁶ Both Matthew and Luke record the three miracles after these sea crossings, but record different things prior to the four stories (Matt 8.22-9.26; Luke 8.22-56).

⁷ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 384 [abbreviated BDAG].

⁸ "93-year-old veteran relives D-Day parachute jump," *New York Post*, June 6, 2014, <http://nypost.com/2014/06/93-year-old-veteran-relives-d-day-parachute-jump/> Retrieved June 7, 2014.