

HOW TO AVOID MISSING GOD

Three Tests God Ordains for His People

Read Mark 6:45-52

INTRODUCTION:

The Oxford Dictionary defines **a test** as *a procedure intended to establish the quality, performance, or reliability of something, especially before it is taken into widespread use*. In order to cement the understanding of His teachings in the lives His disciples, the Lord Jesus Christ *tested* His disciples. There are three kinds of test that God ordains for His people. The first test is diagnostic, revealing where we are. The second is educational, revealing what we need. This test of Jesus with his disciples revealed to them and us that even after we believe, we stand in need of daily illumination and grace to see Jesus.

It is nearly impossible for anyone to read of this miracle without sensing that something very special and unique is happening here, which contains a message for each of us. What is obvious at the start is that this account is both a *story of rescue* and a *story of revelation*. On the one hand, we see a trial—the disciples are struggling at sea. On the other hand, we see a revelation—Jesus comes walking upon the sea. When you bring these two facts together, you discover that they combine to form a single purpose, and that is, to show us *how, in the midst of storms and hardships or adversities, God reveals and extends Himself to us in Jesus.*

However, the response of the disciples to this revelation doesn't seem to fit. It seems to contradict the purpose altogether. Instead of rejoicing in the revelation of Christ, the report about the disciples unveils not only their own *weakness* and *hardness*, but it uncovers ours as well. We ask, *how could they who walked so closely with Christ not understand who Jesus was and miss the lesson? How could they develop a hard heart?* And before we can answer, we quickly place our hands over our mouths because the same could be asked of us.

- How is it that our hearts are so cold and callous toward Him who loved us?
- How is it that we who profess to know Him and love Him remain unmoved by His grace?
- Why is it that our hearts are not filled with eagerness and anticipation at the hearing of His Word?

We are not much different than these men. And, like the disciples, *we know* the many times we have been reenrolled in the school of hard-knocks simply because *we forgot what we should have remembered.*

Let us approach this text with an awareness that the Holy Spirit, through Mark, is not just speaking about the disciples, but He is speaking to us as well.

CONTEXT AND MAIN PREACHING POINT:

In the context, this miracle of walking on water is linked with the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 to convey that the same compassion Jesus had for the crowds, He now has for His disciples. And in the deliverance of *both the crowd from hunger and the disciples from crisis*, we are given a glorious self-disclosure of God in the person of Christ!

The miracle before us is a miracle of nature. And all the miracles of Jesus are *miracles with a message*. In John's gospel, these miracles *declare* something of Jesus, but in Mark's gospel, they *prove* something about Jesus. This miracle proves without a doubt that only Jesus can walk where God walks, yet He passes by to give us an opportunity to welcome Him aboard the ship of our hearts.

In the typical Markian style of letting the *actions* of Jesus speak rather than His *words*, Mark has already demonstrated in the teaching of the parables, that the truth of the Kingdom of Christ can only be understood by bringing yourself inside the story and looking at it from the inside out. Like the stained-glass window of a church that reveals its rich colors to those who are inside, Mark shows us that, like the disciples, one must be in the boat with Jesus in order to behold who He is. And this is highly practical for us because it shows us that being *with* Jesus is not just a theoretical truth, my brethren. It has practical consequences—one of which is safety from the wrath of God and peace in the storms of life.

The first insight we are shown in this account is...

EXPOSITION:

A. OUR NEED FOR THE SOVEREIGN PROTECTION OF JESUS (v.45)

- ⁴⁵ And immediately He made His disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side to Bethsaida, while He Himself was sending the multitude away."

Mark launches us into the story with a word of urgency and force. Right after the feeding of the 5000, Jesus *straightway* or **immediately...made** the disciples go on ahead of Him while He dismissed the crowd. The fact that Jesus made them go signals to us that 1) *they were reluctant to go*, and 2) *Jesus found it necessary to use gentle but firm insistence that the disciples leave at once*. Now, why? Mark doesn't tell us. Matthew doesn't tell us. But John does.

- **John 6:15**—Jesus therefore perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force, to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.

Here we are given two answers. The first was to correct the crowd. The second was to protect His men. The crowd was so impressed by the miracle of the loaves and fishes that they acknowledged Jesus was a prophet. And not just *any prophet*, but the eschatological prophet that Moses spoke of who had kingly power. "*Surely this is the prophet who is to come into the world,*" they said (*John 6:14*), so let's make Him king.

Their reasoning went something like this: if **the first prophet Moses** led the people out of slavery to Egypt, surely **the second** would help us escape slavery to Rome. If He has the power to provide bread, then surely nothing can prevent Him from giving us what all the children of Israel long for—independence from Rome.

And with this mindset, they were like so many people today who want Jesus as long as He gives them what they want. The crowd wanted to make Jesus *a political king* to drive the Romans out, not king over their own hearts. And they were willing to try to force Him to assume the mantle *they* had in mind for Him. But let it be known, my brethren, Jesus will not be strong-armed or manipulated into being anyone's puppet.

Jesus will not be *made* king; He was *born* a King (*Matt.2:2*). He will not *receive* His kingdom from the hands of men, but He will *establish* His kingdom by His own power, and its government will rest on His shoulders (*Is.9:7ff*). The truth of the matter is, Jesus' kingdom is like no other (*John 18:36*). *The way His kingdom triumphs* would not be by beating the enemy in guerilla warfare, but by dying and rising from the dead! He would go to Jerusalem not to *wield the spear* and *bring the judgment*, but to *receive the spear thrust* and *bear the judgment* (*1 Pet.3:18*).

And therefore, to allow the crowd to have their way would have interfered with the divine timetable and plan for Christ and would have been premature. Yes, the crowd would acknowledge that He was a prophet, and they desired to make Him a king, but little did they know that between His office of Prophet and King, there was another office that comes between these—that of a *priest*. Jesus came to give His life as a ransom for many (*Mark 10:45*). Christ could not be their King until He had first officiated His office as *priest* in offering Himself as a sacrifice for sin.

Now, as we think about the wrong motives of this crowd, we must not avoid *examining ourselves to see if we are in the crowd*. Are we like them who wanted *comfort in sorrow, strength in difficulty, peace in turmoil*, and when life has got us down, we find that there is no one as wonderful as Jesus? We talk to Him and walk with Him and open our hearts to Him when we are hurting, but when He comes to us with some clear demand for sacrifice, or with some challenge or offer of the cross, then we will have nothing to do with Him.

Don't ignore this possibility. Examine yourself at this moment. Do you find yourself like the crowd, who only loves Jesus *for what you can get out of Him*, but when He comes calling you to take up the cross, you find yourself *resentful* and *hostile toward His demands*?

The second insight we discover in this account concerns...

B. OUR NEED FOR THE DIVINE INTERCESSION OF JESUS (vv.46-47)

Now, in this scene, don't let the Shepherd-like way in which Jesus deals with this situation escape you. Here, Jesus performs another act of self-denial.

While the disciples sail away in peace, He stays to deal with and dismiss the crowd alone. Spurgeon says, "As a captain is the last to leave the ship, so is the Lord the last to leave the scene of labor." And having dismissed the crowd, "*He left for the mountain to pray*" (*v.46*).

Here again, we are confronted with the prayer life of Jesus. And oh, how convicting it is when we see the *delight* and the *depth* of His intimacy with the Father in light of ours! It is no wonder that after seeing Him pray, the disciples asked Him, "*Lord teach us to pray*" (*Luke 11:1*). Do you feel that way as you read these words, "*And after bidding them farewell, He left for the mountain to pray*" (*v.46*). How often do we hear about prayer and talk about prayer, and yet do very little about it?

- *What did He pray about?*
- *Where did He find the strength?*
- *How long did He pray?*
- *What can we learn from Jesus about prayer?*

It goes without saying that Jesus was a man of constant communion with the Father. It was His very breath. His life was marked by "unselfish prayer" (Luke 22:32), "forgiving prayer" (Luke 23:34), "earnest prayer" (Luke 22:44), and "submissive prayer" (Matt.26:39).

Mark gives us no direct insight into what Jesus prayed about. We are simply left with a picture of Jesus in fellowship in prayer with His Father...alone. Alone, yet not alone, our Lord drank in new strength as He communed with His Father in the mountain. Mark leaves us to draw only one conclusion from this scene—Jesus needed time alone with God and sought special times of fellowship with the Father. And so do we.

When you find yourself short of faith for the task, love for people, knowledge for the journey, or focus for the race, let this truth encourage you, my brethren. Jesus is not only *the author* of our faith, but He is also *the finisher* as well (Heb.12:2). He will complete what He started. If you have even the tiniest beginning of grace in your soul and are but a babe in the faith, know this: Jesus will supply fresh mercies for you, and you will grow and increase in faith. He will save to the uttermost—that is, to the last and final end of complete salvation.

Now we come to the centerpiece of the story. And here we discover...

C. OUR NEED FOR THE MIRACULOUS INTERVENTION OF JESUS (vv.48-52)

As the scene switches from Jesus to the disciples, Mark highlights five details that we need to notice—beginning at verse 47.

1. The boat was "in the middle of the sea." (v.47)
2. Jesus saw the disciples "straining at the oars." (v.48)
3. He "intended to pass by them." (v.48)
4. He spoke "with" them. (v.50)
5. The miracle left the disciples "utterly astonished." (v.51)

Let's consider **the first detail**. "But when it was evening, the boat was in the midst of the sea and He was alone on the land."

Mark stresses the time of day—which was evening and, therefore, dark. The place was the middle of the sea, and therefore *they were separated and alone*. Whenever the disciples are separated from Jesus in the gospel of Mark, or at least appear to be, *they fall into distress*, and so do we.

Now they find themselves facing a common and well-known easterly gale wind known as the *Sharkia*. Most fishermen knew about these winds, but now the disciples find themselves in one, yet without Jesus in the boat! Does this not remind us that the temptations we face are common to man? Our troubles are not uncommon to people, but we often feel that way. Yet the absence of the crowd and seemingly absence of the Lord are all details that Mark highlights to bring into sharp focus the principle that Jesus was seeking to teach them in this drama.

In **the second detail**, we find that they are "straining at the oars." This alerts us to the fact that there were physical exhaustion and fatigue involved. The waves and the winds were *harassing* them, as it were, *draining* their strength, and seeking to keep them from reaching their destination.

Oh, does this not depict the battle we face against the world, the flesh, and the devil? Now keep in mind that *they are just doing what the Lord commanded them to do*. And yet, they find themselves in dire straits, battling against contrary winds and adverse conditions.

But...oh hallelujah! *"He sees them straining at the oars, for the wind was against them,"* and He sees you, my friend, and He sees me. His coming to them was a direct response to the distress that He perceived that they felt. It may have appeared to them that *He had forgotten them*, but His eye was constantly upon them.

- When does He come?—*"about the fourth watch of the night" (v.48a)* (between 3:00 and 6:00am Roman time), or right on time.
- How does He come?—*"Walking on the sea" (v.48b)*

That which *hindered* the disciples *cannot* stop Jesus. Despite the tempestuous billows and the strong headwinds, *without deviation, our Lord steps upon the sea*. The waves that *frightened* His men became a smooth carpet for His blessed feet! The winds that howled and sought to keep them back, now give way as Jesus moves step-by-step toward His troubled disciples. Open water, which is not suited to sustain a human body, now became a *sidewalk* to bring Jesus to His men! Somebody say, "Amen!"

Now **the third detail**: *"And he intended to pass them by." (v.48c)*

What in the world is Mark talking about here? This was not a usual action on the part of Jesus, but it has been misinterpreted. Pay attention now!

Luke, in the account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, points out a similar action on the part of Christ. He says that *"as they approached the village where they were going, and He [Jesus] acted as though He would go farther. But they urged Him, saying, 'Stay with us...'" (Luke 24:28-29)*. Is Jesus seeking to fake them out? Juke them? Is He playing games with His men? Oh no!

The only way to understand this is to interpret it against the backdrop of the Old Testament. At Mount Sinai, you recall, the transcendent Lord *"passed by"* Moses (*Ex.33:22, 19; 34:6*) in order to reveal His name and compassion. It was at Mount Horeb the Lord revealed His presence to Elijah by *"passing by"* not in the mighty wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but in the sound of the gentle blowing wind (*1 Kings 19:9-14*). But Job captures the thought best when writes in chapter 9:5ff,

- *"It is God who removes the mountains, they know not how,
When He overturns them in His anger;
Who shakes the earth out of its place,
And its pillars tremble;
Who commands the sun not to shine,
And sets a seal upon the stars;
Who alone stretches out the heavens,
And tramples down the waves of the sea;*

Verse 11,

- *"Were He to pass by me, I would not see Him;
Were He to move past me, I would not perceive Him."*

Mark, who would have been familiar with Job, picks up on Job's thought and applies it to Christ. Job marshals the kingdom of nature before us and says in essence:

- Look! There is nothing more firm than *the mountains*, yet God has the power to remove them at will. Look! There is nothing more fixed than *the earth* on its orbit, but God can heave it off its course and make its pillars tremble.
- Look! There is nothing more constant than *the sun*, it never misses an appointed time, but God, when He pleases, can suspend it in time.
- Look! He not only spreads out *the heavens*, but He keeps them spread out, or else they would roll up like a scroll. And *the waves*, the proud mighty waves of the sea, who can suppress them? God and God alone tramples them down!

What is Job saying? He is saying that God is such a great God, such a mysterious God, such a wonder-working God, that our finite thinking cannot fathom His counsel. We cannot apprehend His movements. He acts invisibly and undiscerned. Every day He goes right by us in His divine operations, and we see Him not.

But in this case, Mark says, in the person of Jesus, God appears for the purpose of being seen. This is a New Testament theophany (*an appearance of God*). It is a divine epiphany (a revelation of God).

You might translate this statement, "*He intended or desired to pass by them,*" so that they *would* see Him. He was seeking to come right alongside the boat so that they would know that it was Him, be reassured of His presence, and as John adds, "*so they were willing to receive Him into the boat*" (John 6:21).

Do you see what Mark is saying? He is saying that the God who performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, and miracles that cannot be numbered (*Job 9:10*), is making Himself known and extending His compassion in the person of Jesus!

*All hail the power of Jesus' name!
Let angels prostrate fall.
Bring forth the royal diadem
And crown Him Lord of all.¹*

It is Jesus who walks where only God can walk because He is God.

Now, the account would seem at this point to teach us some very positive and poignant lessons, but **the fourth and fifth details** take our application in a different direction.

- ⁵⁰ for they all saw Him and were terrified. But immediately He spoke with them and said to them, "Take courage; it is I, do not be afraid." ⁵¹ Then He got into the boat with them, and the winds stopped; and they were utterly astonished, ⁵² for they had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves, but their heart was hardened.

Mark is the only writer who reveals the reason for the disciples' response. Although they were *witnesses of the miracle* and even participants to a certain extent, they failed to see what it truly revealed about Christ, not because of their *personality*, or their *background*, or even their *education* or *growth*. The trouble was with their *hearts*.

¹ Edward Perronet, All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name

- ⁵² for they had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves, but their heart was hardened.

CONCLUSION:

The application for us is...

Critical. If “*Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart*” (1 Sam.16:7), then we can know that whatever is going on in our hearts at this moment is of *utmost importance to God*. It is the root and core of our lives and the mainspring of our words and actions (Matt.12:34; 15:19; 22:37).

When Mark says that *the hearts of the disciples were hardened*, he reveals two things to us.

1. Their inability to draw the necessary conclusions from the miracle of Jesus was the result of a sinful neglect to ponder and meditate on the works and nature of the One who performed it. In other words, *spiritual sluggishness is the direct consequence of an unwillingness to stop and think seriously about who Christ is, what He has done, and what could be expected of such a divine Being.*
2. In order to “truly get” the lessons that Scripture intends to teach us, your faith—our faith—must be *wide-awake*. We can be involved but hardened. We can be in the boat, but out to lunch. We can be into the sermon, but not the Savior.

Hardness of heart is not just a danger for *outsiders*, but also for *insiders*. Faith is not something that happens *automatically* or evolves *inevitably*. **It is a decision that must be made in the face of struggle and fear.** It is possible to see the power and grace of Jesus and yet have a heart that remains hardened. So remember, nearness to Him is no guarantee of real trust of Him; even blessings from Him are not always the same thing as genuine faith.

Here is the take-away from this text: the thing we need most in our journey of faith is a *fresh, clear view of Jesus and a softening of our hearts!* We need *His protection*. We need *His intercession*. We need *His intervention*. What would Christ have us do today? One thing is to cry out to Him.

*Pass me not, O gentle Savior,
hear my humble cry;
while on others thou art calling,
do not pass me by.*

*Let me at thy throne of mercy
find a sweet relief;
kneeling there in deep contrition,
help my unbelief.²*

Another is to reprioritize our lives.

*Trusting only in thy merit,
would I seek thy face;
heal my wounded, broken spirit,
save me by thy grace.*

² Fanny Crosby, *Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior*

*Thou the spring of all my comfort,
more than life to me,
whom have I on earth beside thee?
Whom in heaven but thee?*³

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³ Ibid.