

LESSON SIX

TESTING FAITH

They all saw Him and were troubled. But immediately He talked with them and said to them, "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid."

MARK 6:50 NKJV

REFLECTION

Uncomfortable or threatening episodes usually happen when we least expect them. We're sailing along on the placid surface of the familiar, and suddenly a storm breaks out. We're going with the flow, and then the wind picks up and the going gets tough. What experience comes to mind when you think about feeling alone or being in danger? In that situation, how were you aware of God's presence?

SITUATION

After the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus needed some time alone. So he sent the disciples ahead in the boat to their next stop. In Jesus' day, traveling by boat was the fastest way to go. Most journeys had to be over land, but whenever a route could include sailing, the trip was often shorter. That is, unless storm winds began blowing.

OBSERVATION

Read Mark 6:45-51 from the New International Version or the New King James Version.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

⁴⁵ Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶ After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.

⁴⁷ Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. ⁴⁸ He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because

the wind was against them. Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, ⁴⁹ but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, ⁵⁰ because they all saw him and were terrified.

Immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." ⁵¹ Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed.

NEW KING JAMES VERSION

⁴⁵ Immediately He made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while He sent the multitude away. ⁴⁶ And when He had sent them away, He departed to the mountain to pray. ⁴⁷ Now when evening came, the boat was in the middle of the sea; and He was alone on the land. ⁴⁸ Then He saw them straining at rowing, for the wind was against them. Now about the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea, and would have passed them by. ⁴⁹ And when they saw Him walking on the sea, they supposed it was a ghost, and cried out; ⁵⁰ for they all saw Him and were troubled. But immediately He talked with them and said to them, "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid." ⁵¹ Then He went up into the boat to them, and the wind ceased. And they were greatly amazed in themselves beyond measure, and marveled.

EXPLORATION

1. Why didn't Jesus go with the disciples in the boat?

2. What do you think prevented the disciples from recognizing Jesus?

3. Why do you think Jesus walked by the disciples as they strained against the oars?

4. What might Jesus have been trying to teach the disciples through this experience?

5. What can you learn from the disciples' experience?

6. What are some reasons why God may decide to test our faith?

INSPIRATION

The presence of troubles doesn't surprise us. The absence of God, however, undoes us. We can deal with the ambulance if God is in it. We can stomach the ICU if God is in it. We can face the empty house if God is in it.

Is he?

Matthew would like to answer that question for you. The walls falling around him were made of water. No roof collapsed, but it seemed as though the sky had. A storm on the Sea of Galilee was akin to a sumo wrestler's belly flop on a kiddie pool. The northern valley acted like a

wind tunnel, compressing and hosing squalls onto the lake. Waves as tall as ten feet were common.

The account begins at nightfall. Jesus is on the mountain in prayer, and the disciples are in the boat in fear. . . . When does Christ come to them? At three o'clock in the morning! If "evening" began at six o'clock and Christ came at three in the morning, the disciples were alone in the storm for nine hours! Nine tempestuous hours. Long enough for more than one disciple to ask, "Where is Jesus? He knows we are in the boat. For heaven's sake, it was his idea. Is God anywhere near?"

And from within the storm comes an unmistakable voice: "I am."

Wet robe, soaked hair. Waves slapping his waist and rain stinging his face. Jesus speaks to them at once. . . . A literal translation of his announcement results in "Courage! I am! Don't be afraid." Translators tinker with his words for obvious reasons. "I am" sounds truncated. "I am here" or "It is I" feels more complete. But what Jesus shouted in the storm was simply the magisterial: "I am." . . .

From the center of the storm, the unwavering Jesus shouts, "I am." Tall in the Trade Tower wreckage. Bold against the Galilean waves. ICU, battlefield, boardroom, prison cell, or maternity ward—whatever your storm, "I am." (From *Next Door Savior* by Max Lucado.)

REACTION

7. In what ways has your faith been tested recently by the storms in your life?

8. How has Jesus responded to you during your test of faith?

9. Jesus calmed the disciples in their greatest moment of fear by reassuring them of his identity. How does knowing Jesus help during times of testing?

10. What can you do to strengthen your faith for times of testing?

11. How have the victorious experiences of others helped your faith grow?

12. In what ways can your testing be a tool of evangelism for others?

LIFE LESSONS

Unlike the earlier storm that Jesus stilled (see Mark 4:35–41), this one merely stirred up winds and waves that resisted the disciples' progress. The disciples were working hard. Absorbed in their own efforts, they apparently almost missed Jesus walking by on the water. They were probably wondering why he hadn't accompanied them on the trip, yet they were surprised and even fearful when he suddenly appeared. When we get so wrapped up in the challenges of life—or even in obeying Christ's direction—that we lose a sense of his presence, we have shifted our focus to the wrong thing. In such instances, God will often send tests our way to call our attention back to Jesus.

DEVOTION

Lord Jesus, don't ever let me get so wrapped up in serving you that I stop watching for you. Remind me that resistance and hardship sometimes come to help me see that your purposes have less to do with what I accomplish and more to do with what you accomplish in and through me. Help me trust that whatever you need to do to accomplish your purposes in my life, you will do, and at the perfect moment. Teach me to count on you even when I can't see you.

JOURNALING

When testing comes, how can you remind yourself that Jesus is always there, even if you can't "see" him? Explain.

FOR FURTHER READING

To complete the book of Mark during this twelve-part study, read Mark 6:1-56. For more Bible passages about testing faith, read Psalm 112:8; John 16:33; 18:15-18, 25-27; 1 Corinthians 16:13; Hebrews 11:7-12.