

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for January 3: How to be courageous

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Courage possibly is associated rarely with faith or following Jesus. Perhaps this is because faith itself is not well understood and the initial levels of faith for believers, seen most often by the world, have little to do with courage building. Nevertheless courage is an appropriate characteristic of faith as it advances through intermediate stages.

Mark chapters 6-8 is a good place to study the characteristics of intermediate faith. This section of the Gospel shows Jesus leading his disciples to progress in their faith, from gifting them for service (Mark 6:7-10) to leading them to understand his true identity (Mark 8:27-38).

The present background passage treats events early in this intermediate process. The so-called Great Galilean Ministry of Jesus was closing out after repeated preaching and healing tours of Galilee by Jesus and his disciples. Once again in Mark 6:6 they penetrated the province in teams. News of this scurry of activity came to Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, who had executed John the Baptist. Herod saw in Jesus a ministry similar to John's, a dangerous prospect for Jesus. From this point, Jesus seems to abandon pursuit of public attention, preferring semi-private time to train his disciples. Thus Jesus' great Galilean ministry closes out with successive withdrawals, that is, movements away from public attention, though people still sought and found Jesus.

Jesus embarked on the first of these withdrawals in Mark 6:30, perhaps sailing from Herod Antipas' jurisdiction, though Mark does not say where

Jesus went. The remainder of Mark 6 tells of events that occur during this withdrawal. The story of the feeding of the 5,000, with so many people present, does not seem to have a character of a withdrawal, yet one should notice that Jesus had sought to get away (v. 31) the remoteness of the location (v. 32).

Surely Jesus' efforts to withdraw had effects on the disciples. Jesus' ministry was changing form and the disciples were likewise challenged to continue serving and following Jesus with courage.

In overwhelming need (Mark 6:35-37)

The first of many challenges to serving with courage presented itself with the famous feeding of the 5,000. This event was so astounding it is the only miracle of Jesus to be recorded by all four Gospels. More astounding is the event developed in counterpoint to common sense and Jesus' established ministry pattern. The reason for this is simple, yet profound: Jesus desired to express God's grand compassion for his people and took upon himself to address a common and pressing need of the people, the need to eat, which was compounded by their great numbers in a remote location. Jesus saw their overwhelming need and took preemptive action to satisfy it.

The lesson for believers is strong: Jesus' followers must learn to see the needs of people about them and seize opportunities to minister with grace to people in Jesus' name.

The reasons for this withdrawal by Jesus and his disciples is found in Mark 6:31. They were tired and had gone without food. They needed a place of refuge and rest. How ironic that the feeding of the 5,000 had its origins in the unsatisfied hungry status of Jesus and disciples. Jesus withdrew from the people when he needed to eat, but he did not withdraw from the people when they needed to eat!

Boats traveling on the Sea of Galilee can be seen in good weather from all

shores. Those who are observant can track the progress of sailing vessels. Furthermore it is not surprising that some people could outrun boats. Thus word spread about Jesus' location and crowds flocked to see him, even though they had to travel a long distance to reach him.

Verse 34 provides important insight into the rapidly developing situation. First, Jesus had compassion for the people. Out of this compassion He first taught the people, then he fed them. The verse also states Jesus saw the people as having no shepherd, that is, no satisfactory spiritual leadership. If the people had adequate spiritual instruction, they might not have been chasing Jesus along the deserted pathways around the Sea of Galilee. Jesus' teaching was needed, therefore, to address this situation in their lives.

Verses 35 and 36 show the disciples also had compassion for the people. Their solution was to dismiss the people so they could find food, but it was a compassionate solution just the same, especially in view of the lateness of the day. Thus the first stirrings of courage to act on their observance of their Lord's sentiments are seen.

Jesus, this time, had no interest in disbursing the crowd. He wanted to satisfy their pressing need through a demonstration of God's compassion in grand scale. The disciples already knew the size of the crowd and quickly calculated the resources necessary to feed such a group. Their initial objection to Jesus' direction simply shows the impossibility of the situation in which God would work. In human terms, feeding the crowd was impossible, but things are different for an all powerful God who has felt compassion for a leaderless people.

In obeying God (Mark 6:38-44)

To their credit, Jesus' disciples followed his commands without further objection. They could sense their Lord stirring to decisive action. It takes a courageous faith and determined discipleship to follow simple, clear

commands of the Lord which seem to stand against human assessment of a situation. A nonbeliever or a beginning believer may not be able to sense the Lord's pending action, but a more seasoned disciple must be willing to follow the Lord courageously, when human logic and common sense point elsewhere. In so doing, Jesus' disciples became witnesses of perhaps the greatest of Jesus' miracles.

The scarcity of the provisions, the enormity of the crowd and the abundance of the remaining food, show the grand nature of God's activity in this feeding event. These characteristics place this event alongside the events of Israel's wilderness wanderings, a connection that John 6 makes.

Verse 44 records the size of the crowd as 5,000 men. This, of course, is both an estimate and a shorthand rendering of the size of the crowd. The verse mentions men in the sense of representing households. If women and children were to be factored in, an estimate of 15,000 is not unreasonable—even 18,000 to 20,000 is not out of range. The point is that the crowd was considerably large. Even with today's food service systems, feeding 15,000 people in one location and one sitting is far from simple. But Jesus handled the feeding of his followers with apparent ease, breaking the bread and fish, until all were completely satisfied.

For Jesus' followers, the lesson to be remembered is that God completely satisfies, therefore believers must learn to serve him courageously, obeying his commands, even in the face contrary human wisdom. Jesus' disciples courageously obeyed Jesus as they carried out his instructions as they ministered to the people.

In obvious distress (Mark 6:45-52)

If Jesus' command to provide food for the hungry crowd seemed strange, surely Jesus' command to sail without him seemed even more strange because the first duty of a disciple is to tend to his master. Nevertheless,

perhaps after seeing the grand scale feeding of so many people, the disciples had learned sufficiently to obey Jesus without questioning him. Thus they sailed away without Jesus, perhaps resolving they would join up with him in Bethsaida, their destination.

The progress of the obedient disciples was difficult because the wind was contrary and their rowing became difficult. Verse 48 says Jesus came to them during the fourth watch of the night. Nights were divided into four watches, thus this was the last watch of the night. The disciples had been rowing all night to cross a lake they could have possibly walked around by now. Their seemingly frustrating situation was the result of their obedience to Jesus. Yet in this situation, they would observe their Lord in yet another astounding way.

Jesus came to his disciples by walking on the water. When their human senses could make no sense of Jesus' action, they became terrified. Terror or fear is the first emotion humans express when confronted by God (compare Isaiah 6:5). Without fail, in such situations, God reassures his people by telling them not to fear.

In verse 50, Jesus tells his disciples not to fear and adds the admonition to take courage. Jesus' point is that his followers take courage from his presence, no matter how he comes to them. Jesus amazed the crowds who sought him as he toured Galilee, but now the disciples are amazed by activity which increasingly reveals Jesus' divine nature. Only the Creator can satisfy the hunger of a large crowd with such ease and facility. Only the Creator can walk on water. Only the Lord calms the fears of his followers.

God's presence in our lives is meant to give us courage. The disciples were to take courage from the fact that the Creator had just stepped into their boat. The Lord hadn't really been out of their presence at all. He was knowledgeable of their situation. He was able to find them in the midst of their distress in heavy seas with contrary winds. They were to take

courage, not simply because he returned to them, but because he had been watching over them all along. They had never been out of his reach. Their obedience to his instruction placed them in the position to witness another astounding miracle revealing his true nature. The lesson is that when we obey God, more of his nature is revealed to us.

Verse 50 carries the thematic command for the entire lesson: take courage! Jesus' followers will advance in their walks with the Lord as they courageously follow him, being careful to sense his attitude toward people, to obey him against the best indications of human judgment, and to turn to him in times of distress.