

I AM HERE

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The Gospel of Mark, though it reviews many of the same events in the life of Jesus, takes a very different approach than Matthew's book. Mark begins with a single sentence of introduction, and scarcely pauses to breathe until he is done. He seems eager, if not passionate, for us to get the message as quickly as possible.

His book may be the result of interviewing Peter and recording his eyewitness accounts. It seems to be written for the equivalent of our modern businessman — the Roman citizen — worldly-wise, multi-tasking, working men and women. His pace is brisk, like the tickertape news bulletins that scroll across the bottom of your screen during a newscast. Just the facts, ma'am. God loves you very much and has saved you with a great salvation.

Mark uses the word "immediately" to describe activities *three times* as frequently as Matthew. This should heighten our sense of the immediacy of God's presence and powerful purpose. He is *here* and He is *now!* *Today* is the day of salvation!

And today we are going to examine a narrative passage from Mark 6 that offers a little upbeat comedy, plenty of tense drama, and thrilling miracles. But it's not just entertaining, it's potentially life-changing, because the real Jesus is in the middle of it!

Jesus had sent His disciples out on their first ministry tour to nearby towns and villages, having authorized them to preach the Kingdom of God, cast out demons, and heal the sick. He sent them with nothing extra, no food, no money, no overcoat, nor even extra underwear, so that they would learn to rely entirely upon God's gracious provision through the people they would meet.

Mark 6:30 *The apostles returned to Jesus from their ministry tour and told him all they had done and taught.* ³¹ *Then Jesus said, "Let's go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile." He said this because there were so many people coming and going that Jesus and his apostles didn't even have time to eat.*

This was the origin of the modern vacation! Ministry, done well, can be exhausting. And active ministry can be exciting. And excitement can carry us into an emotional danger zone.

When the Spirit moves you, your emotions may also be stirred. While rejoicing in spirit for what God has done, your flesh — half-exhausted, half-excited — may be more prone than usual to temptation and sin.

One solution that has been suggested is to eliminate or prevent emotional stirring from your spiritual experience. What a dull religion that produces!

The more effective solution is to be aware of the danger and take precautions. Jesus' prescription is effective: go to a quiet place and rest. Quiet the flesh so the work of the Spirit may settle within you. That's one of the reasons we invite people to come to the altar area and pray before leaving a worship service. It allows focused quiet time for the Spirit to implant His work in you.

Mark 6:32 So they left by boat for a quiet place, where they could be alone. ³³ But many people recognized them and saw them leaving, and people from many towns ran ahead along the shore and got there ahead of them. ³⁴ Jesus saw the huge crowd as he stepped from the boat, and he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

Ministry is not always convenient. It is almost always about going *out of your way* to help someone else.

If you are devoted to your own convenience, you will rarely minister to others. You may tell yourself that God hasn't called you, but, in reality, He has called us all; convenience has hardened your heart. You need to get your eyes off of yourself and onto the Lord.

Other people, seeing the need, feel compelled to action, regardless of the cost in energy and emotion. There is unending need around us. Unbridled compassion will surely burn you out. You need boundaries to protect your energies.

How can you know if a perceived need is actually a ministry opportunity or not? Here are three things to consider:

1. Check your "willingness quotient." Are you eager to serve the Lord? Or reluctant? If your WQ is low, you need to repent and be filled with the Spirit again.

2. Check your "mental-energy level." If you are really exhausted, you will be unable to discern the Lord's direction clearly. This is *not* your opportunity to serve. You need to rest. Remember, *you* are not the world's savior. God has other servants in readiness.

3. Consider God's activity. Do you sense that God is active in this circumstance — has been preparing the way, wants to act, is asking for your participation? Then, with an open heart, step in to obey, for He will be with you.

Mark 6:35 Late in the afternoon his disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. ³⁶ Send the crowds away so they can go to the nearby farms and villages and buy something to eat."

The disciples saw a legitimate need, and suggested a thoughtful and compassionate response. Jesus saw the need, too, but He had another response in mind.

Mark 6:37 But Jesus said, "You feed them."

"With what?" they asked. "We'd have to work for months to earn enough money to buy food for all these people!"

Their experience told them that it would require a small fortune to feed so many people. Even if they were willing, they lacked the means necessary to provide for them.

Mark 6:38 "How much bread do you have?" he asked. "Go and find out."

Miracles do not flow from what you *do not* have, but from what you have and are willing to give. What is in your hand? With his shepherd's staff, Moses parted the Red Sea. Putting their feet into the water, the Levites parted the Jordan River. With a choir and a shout, Joshua brought down the walls of Jericho. Armed with ram's horns (shofars) and clay lanterns, Gideon's 300 troops overthrew the tens of thou-

sands of cruel Midianites. With five stones and leather sling, David overcame the giant warrior, Goliath. What is in *your* hand?

Mark 6:38 They came back and reported, “We have five loaves of bread and two fish.”

³⁹ Then Jesus told the disciples to have the people sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups of fifty or a hundred.

⁴¹ Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up toward heaven, and blessed them. Then, breaking the loaves into pieces, he kept giving the bread to the disciples so they could distribute it to the people. He also divided the fish for everyone to share. ⁴² They all ate as much as they wanted, ⁴³ and afterward, the disciples picked up twelve baskets of leftover bread and fish. ⁴⁴ A total of 5,000 men and their families were fed from those loaves!

After His resurrection, Jesus came alongside two disciples who were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Sorrowing over His recent death, they did not recognize Him as He spoke with them. But when He sat with them to eat and, looking up to heaven, blessed the meal, their eyes were suddenly opened and they recognized Him and knew He was alive again! I believe they were with Him on the day they fed the five thousand. That simple gesture unleashed the miraculous grace of God, and they never forgot it. What happens when you bless your food before eating? If you genuinely look up toward heaven, you can count on a heavenly response of some kind.

Mark 6:45 Immediately after this, Jesus insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and head across the lake to Bethsaida, while he sent the people home. ⁴⁶ Afterward, he went up into the hills by himself to pray.

Time for another ministry break. This time, Jesus needed even to break away from His disciples and be alone with the Father. For each of us, some alone-time with God would be beneficial. Not in front of the TV. Not with a magazine or a good book. Not with your cell phone at your side. Just *with God* — talking, listening, thinking.

Mark 6:47 Late that night, the disciples were in their boat in the middle of the lake, and Jesus was alone on land. ⁴⁸ He saw that they were in serious trouble, rowing hard and struggling against the wind and waves.

Some nights are like that. In fact, some days are like that, too. The disciples were in their boat in the middle of the lake, and Jesus was not present — He was back on the land. Whenever Jesus is not present, even if it is by His own design, things get rough. And although these men were experienced sailors, “they were in serious trouble.”

You may have fallen into “serious trouble” in an area of usual competence. It’s shocking, unnerving. If you are unaware of Jesus’ presence, it can be downright terrifying.

What I love about this record is that, even from a great distance (the Sea of Galilee is about eight miles wide) and in darkness of night, Jesus saw them, saw that they were in serious trouble, saw the wind and waves that opposed them, and saw their struggle to overcome.

He may have seemed distant and “away” to them, but the distance was as nothing to Him and He was aware of their every move. He is just as aware of you! And He is never so distant that He cannot help you.

And know this, too: *you* may be in a panic over your circumstances, but Jesus *is not!*

Mark 6:48 About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. He intended to go past them,⁴⁹ but when they saw him walking on the water, they cried out in terror, thinking he was a ghost.⁵⁰ They were all terrified when they saw him.

"He intended to go past them." Not because He was indifferent to their plight. Their plight was the reason He had come. But He was not afraid for them! He was confident they would make it through all right. I believe that He thought that just seeing Him would be enough to assure them of a good outcome. After all, if Jesus could *walk* through the wind and waves, surely they could sail through them.

But they were not so confident. Instead of assuring them, His appearance terrified them, because they did not recognize Him. Circumstances can do that to us, so discomfit us that we lose all awareness of and faith in God's powerful and provident presence; make us feel completely alone and helpless.

But the Bible assures us that even in our aloneness, we are never completely alone.

Hebrews 13:5 For God has said, "I will never fail you. I will never abandon you."⁶ So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper, so I will have no fear. What can mere people do to me?"

God knows your name, and the number of hairs on your head. He knows what you are facing and struggling with. And He has promised to be with you always, for as long as you live.

Mark 6:50 But Jesus spoke to them at once. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Take courage! I am here!"⁵¹ Then he climbed into the boat, and the wind stopped. They were totally amazed,⁵² for they still didn't understand the significance of the miracle of the loaves. Their hearts were too hard to take it in.

He spoke to them. Oh, the power of *that voice* to calm the soul!

"Don't be afraid." Why? Because "I am here."

"Take courage!" From where? "I am here."

His presence makes *all* the difference! "With God all things are possible." "I can do *all things* through Christ who gives me strength."

Then, to top it all off, He climbed into the boat and the roaring wind just stopped. Wow! They were astonished! Who was this man? They didn't get it.

The "miracle of the loaves" signified God's compassion for our very human needs and His readiness to meet those needs. As Jesus had taught them before:

Matthew 6:31 "So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?'"³² These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs.³³ Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need."

The "miracle of the loaves" also signified that God can still make much out of little. What is in your hand? Offer it to God. When your hand (and what is in it) is in His hand, He can do great things with it.

Have your hearts been too hard also? Have you doubted God's love? Have you suspected that Jesus was indifferent? Have you lost sight of Jesus and been wrestling in your own strength against the contrary winds of life? Are you willing to acknowledge such unbelief and repent today?

May God soften your hearts to take this in today. And may your hearts rejoice for His amazing and abundant grace.