

Galilee Faith

This message takes us to Galilee and calls us to a deeper faith.

When the holy land tour group arrived in Galilee I was overstimulated, in a wonderful way, by the historically and spiritually significant experiences of the previous four days. On our tour of Jordan, we had visited the ruins of the Ammon Citadel. We had taken in the view from Mount Nebo. We visited Machaerus, the palace of Herod where John the Baptist was believed to be imprisoned and killed. We spent the Sabbath exploring Petra which was like an experience in the National Parks of southern Utah with the addition of ancient ruins and biblically significant sites. We floated in the Dead Sea and participated in pilgrim's baptisms in the Jordan River. After crossing over into Israel we stopped at Jericho, where we found it humorous to see a work crew repairing a wall (it must have come tumbling down). We stayed at Engedi, a wilderness area where John the Baptist would have wandered. We saw caves in the hillsides in the area where David hid from Saul. We visited the community of Qumran where the Dead Sea scrolls were found. From there we went south to wander atop Masada.

The itinerary was loaded, and I was loving it. But something changed when we walked off the bus in Galilee. It was a good change. For the past four days I had experienced Bible lands, but in Galilee I would experience the land of Jesus. I had a wonderful realization that I was in the very place Jesus lived, walked, taught, and healed. Our hotel was on the beach. We swam in the same body of water that Jesus had walked on. It was here that the disciples left their nets to follow Jesus, here that Jesus miraculously filled their nets with fish. The wind that obeyed Jesus blew in that valley. The waves that obeyed him raged in that water.

Again, the itinerary was loaded but I had a personal activity that I had to add to it. I wanted to start my mornings Jesus style in the same land where Jesus rose early to be with his Father. We had two mornings in Galilee. The first morning I went down by the water around 5am. I put my feet in the water, it was 86 degrees. The fish nibbled at my toes. I read Matthew 4 about Jesus beginning his Galilean ministry. Here are the words I read.

Matthew 4:12-17 *Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:*

"The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned." From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

As I watched the sunrise and the light on the water, I thought of how that land had seen so much light from heaven with the presence of Jesus (John 1:9-10). Still, most missed it. I thought of Jesus calling his disciples. I considered how much light has shone into my life. I wrote in my journal, "I must respond to your light."

The second morning I decided I could not pass the opportunity to simulate the experience of Jesus in Mark 1:35, "And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed." I got up at 4:30am to make sure it was dark. The previous morning, there were many people within the hotel grounds having their own morning worship. I had to leave the hotel. It was not as simple as opening the door. There was a metal gate. I shook it and woke the guard. He should have been concerned about letting a foreigner out into the street in the dark, but without a word he opened the gate for me. I chose a route up the hill behind the hotel. I paid careful attention to every aspect of the experience knowing that I was as close as I could get to a morning like Jesus had experienced. His senses took in many of the same things mine would that morning. There was no trail. The hillside was steep and sandy. The only interaction I had was with a kitten, which I startled, and it ran off. I found an overhanging rock that was a perfect destination. I picked seeds off my legs that had attached to me as I moved through the grass. I wondered if Jesus had picked those same seeds off his legs some mornings. He was probably scraped by those same thorns and slipped on the sandy soil as he tried to climb a hill, still a bit sleepy. I heard cicadas and the sound of oars hitting the side of a boat and the echoing voice of the fisherman, who were the first to hit the water that morning. The birds sang with the sunrise. Around 5:30 a rooster crowed. I felt sweaty from the climb. I was distracted by a fly that kept landing on me. The sea was calm as the sun rose. I could see to the opposite shore, some 8 miles away, and the mountains on the east side that rose to the Golan Heights. There was a light breeze but no need for a jacket. I had left a comfortable bed, blackout blinds, and AC, but the place I had come to encouraged prayer. I was alone, at the same time of day Jesus was alone, in the same place, with the same view, talking with the same Father. I returned to the hotel in awe of the standing personal invitation to meet with God.

Galilee was proving to be extra special. We visited Bethsaida, Chorazin, and Capernaum. We saw synagogues and hillsides where Jesus taught and sites where he healed. But the most dramatic faith moment for me was yet to come. It happened on the water. We boarded a boat and moved north along the western shore of Galilee. The captain of the boat played Christian music. I leaned against the rail, having intentionally separated myself from the group. The song How Great is our God began to play. I looked out across water and land that had witnessed the greatness of God. I saw the hills where Jesus preached the sermon on the mount and where he fed the 5,000. I was moved to tears as I considered the greatness of our God.

I knew that many people in the time of Christ had similar faith moments, and even far more intense as they saw the greatness of God with their own eyes. Galilee was a place of faith, and yet their faith was limited. With all the great things God had done there it seems that Galilee faith would be the strongest sort of faith. But they struggled. Galilee faith was a faith that got really excited about the miracles but was skeptical of the miracle worker. Galilee faith ate the bread and had their fill but could not accept the true bread from heaven. Galilee faith gathered so many people to hear Jesus teach that he had to preach from a boat. But when that boat was tossed by the wind and waves, the disciples

panicked. It was a faith that felt strong during the sermon but crumbled in the storm. Galilee faith would eventually lead Jesus to say, “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.” (Matthew 11:21) They followed. They were amazed and interested. They did have faith. But there was something lacking about Galilee faith.

Faith is not something we want to lack. We don’t want to hear Jesus refer to us as someone of little faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). Salvation comes by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8). Faith is the victory that overcomes the world (1 John 5:4). Faith can move mountains (Matthew 17:20). Jesus had to stop doing miracles in places because of a lack of faith (Mark 6:5). The spiritual heroes remembered in Hebrews 11 did all they did by faith.

The people of Galilee had seen the greatness of God and still lacked faith. In this simple realization there is much to learn. Galilee faith teaches us that an experience of the greatness of God is not the full experience of the life of faith. Experiencing a great God is not equal to living with great faith. A handful of spiritual highs are not enough. Those encounters with greatness must work their way into our thinking and living. Faith is not just the emotional moment on the boat in Galilee. Faith is taking that point of connection and letting it change my life. We need those encounters with the greatness of God, but it is our response to those moments that can move us beyond Galilee faith.

The story of Jesus calming the storm on Galilee reveals some trademarks of Galilee faith in the two questions asked by the disciples, 1. “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”, 2. “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”. We will follow this story in Mark 4:35-40.

Verse 35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.”

“That day” was a busy day. It included all the teaching recorded in the chapter. Jesus didn’t give a reason for going to the other side. Part of his reason may have been to build their faith through the storm. We learn in chapter 5 that the main reason for crossing over was to have an encounter with a demon possessed man. Jesus didn’t say, “Let us cross through a life-threatening storm so that we can encounter demons.” When we choose to follow Jesus, we choose to go where he leads. It is a good thing we don’t know all the difficulties in that path.

Verse 36 And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him.

When Jesus calmed the storm, his was not the only boat full of terrified people who saw his power.

We have an idea of what these boats might have been like. Before our tour group went out on the sea, we visited the Jesus Boat, the hull of a first century fishing boat that was

recovered near the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. The boat is 26½ feet long, 7½ feet wide and 4½ feet tall. This is our best estimation of what this boat would have been like. It was small enough that a storm could feel big fast.

Apparently, not all boats survived Galilee storms around the time of Christ. Significantly, the boat was only preserved because it sank. It was found in the mud. The mud had preserved it for 2000 years. As they took it out of the mud, they had to make a careful effort not to destroy what had been preserved. This boat illustrates a powerful truth, sometimes a destructive and tragic experience is the very thing that preserves faith for future generations. The Jesus Boat is an important archeological discovery, giving credibility to the gospel accounts for the fishing activity in the time of Christ. Our faith in the gospel story is boosted because someone's tragedy preserved a boat. The Dead Sea Scrolls tell a similar story. They were only preserved in a cave because the community of Qumran had to flee the Romans. They never came back for them. Be encouraged, the difficulty you go through now may be the thing that preserves faith in a future generation.

That is what this story does. This storm has preserved a story that has encouraged the faith of many for centuries.

Verse 37 And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling.

The storm was a big one. The Greek uses the word "mega" to describe the storm. It was a hurricane force storm. Matthew used the word "seismos", which is often translated as "earthquake", to describe the magnitude of the storm.

Galilee is known for severe storms. It is the world's lowest freshwater lake, nearly 700 feet below the Mediterranean. This low lake is surrounded by mountains. Thirty miles northeast of the lake is the 9,200-foot summit of Mt. Hermon. When the cold air comes off the mountains and hits the warm air coming off the lake it creates exceptionally strong winds. These fishermen were familiar with wind and waves, but this storm had them worried.

Verse 38 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

Here, the fishermen wake the carpenter to help them with trouble on the sea. They were not looking for human help. They woke Jesus for supernatural help.

Galilee faith asks, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" This is, perhaps, the most offensive question you could ask Jesus. John 3:16 tells us that the reason Jesus came to earth is that God's love doesn't want people to perish. Love is the best summary of God's character. They questioned it.

Their question to Jesus features a trademark of Galilee faith.

1st Trademark of Galilee Faith: Galilee faith is not convinced of Jesus' unconditional love. Galilee faith judges God's character through the lens of human circumstances.

The disciples felt that Jesus cared when he multiplied the bread and the fish, but they weren't sure when he slept through the storm. They felt loved by Jesus when they were invited into the inner group of the great rabbi. They no longer felt loved when their situation got scary, and the rabbi didn't stop it.

The storms of life and the silence of God have a long history of shaking faith. Psalm 44:23-24 expresses it this way, "Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?" Galilee faith assumes that God's silence indicates God's indifference. We will have difficult times in which we find God silent. He will appear to sleep when we desperately need him. When God is silent, faith holds on to the truth that the God who is currently silent is a God of love.

Galilee faith feels the approval of God when we get the job and doubts his goodness when we lose it. With Galilee faith we feel lovable when we act well but unlovable when we fall. We need to learn the truth in the second half of this lyric from the song Jesus Loves Me, "Jesus loves me when I'm good, when I do the things, I should. Jesus loves me when I'm bad, even though it makes him sad." Sometimes, the storm is not caused by wind but by our own sin. We are to blame for our bad circumstances. Then we judge that God doesn't love us because we have failed. This is not faith. Faith is not trust in performance but trust in God's love for us despite our performance.

To move beyond Galilee faith our focus should be on knowing God's character. We often misplace our focus by attempting to know God's plan. Then, when that plan doesn't go as we expect, our faith is shaken. When we seek to know his unchanging character and place our faith in it, we have something solid on which to anchor our faith when we don't understand his plan. When we make faith about knowing God's plan, we lose faith as soon as the plan doesn't go the way we expected. When we make the character of God the focus of our faith, we will find Him solid, trustworthy and beautiful through anything He has planned.

Rather than judging God's character through the lens of our circumstances we can endure all circumstances through the lens of his character. Our circumstances do not change his character. Knowing his character changes how we approach our circumstances. When the storm rages and all we see are waves, we know that God is good.

Do you know that Jesus loves you? Love is the core of his character. The teacher does care if you drown. He may appear silent in your storm. That sleeping Jesus loves us.

To move beyond Galilee faith, we must put our faith in God's character of unconditional love.

Verse 39 And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.

Just as the Greek described it as a "mega" storm, it now describes it as a "mega" calm. To get an instant calm required him to speak to both the wind and the waves. The wind

caused the waves, but the waves would not naturally stop when the wind died. When you stop shaking your water bottle, the water takes some time to settle. The Sea of Galilee is 13 miles long and 8 miles wide. Those rough waters would have required time to calm. They skipped that natural process at the command of Jesus.

Verse 40 He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?”

The disciples had some faith. They followed Jesus. They woke him up. When Jesus asked if they had no faith, he was communicating that the level of faith they had was like having none at all. They didn't believe he cared. Their Galilee faith was lacking something significant.

Verse 41 And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

The second question reveals the second trademark of Galilee faith.

2nd Trademark of Galilee Faith: Galilee faith is not convinced of Jesus' divine authority. Galilee faith is impressed by what Jesus does but is ignorant of who Jesus is.

When the tour group visited Capernaum, we saw a home that is believed to be the home of Peter. A shrine has been built over the top of it with a glass bottom so that you can look down into the home. This site has been honored by pilgrims as the home of Peter since the 3rd century. This would have been the closest thing Jesus had to a home during his Galilean ministry. This would have been the place where the roof was taken off and a man was lowered down to be healed (Mark 2:1-12). The obvious thing for Jesus to do here would have been to heal the man's lame body. But Jesus surprised everyone when he said, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Here again we see the trademark of Galilee faith as they stumbled over Jesus' divinity and his authority. The scribes who were there got uncomfortable with his divinity and questioned, “Who can forgive sins but God alone.” (v.7). Galilee faith isn't sure if Jesus is divine. Then Jesus tells plainly why he chose to forgive rather than just heal the body. He did it so that they would know he had authority to forgive. (v.10).

Many people in Galilee saw flashes of divine authority. The telling of the same story in Matthew's account concludes by saying, “When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.” (Matthew 9:8). This authority piece is what caught the people's attention when Jesus first came to Capernaum. They noticed that he taught as one who had authority (Mark 1:22, 27). Galilee faith is interested but not fully convinced.

There is an important difference between power and authority. Power is the ability to do something. Authority is the permission to exercise power. Jesus wasn't just powerful to heal, he had divine authority to forgive. The scribes asked who “can” forgive sins. “Can” is a power word. Jesus responded by affirming that not only can he, but he has authority to do it.

The gospels strain to move us beyond Galilee faith in their reiteration of Jesus having divine authority. Consider the following examples.

John 19:10-11 So Pilate said to him, “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.”

John 17:1-2 “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.”

Matthew 28:18-19 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore...”

John 10:18 “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.”

Colossians 1:16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

1 Peter 3:22 ...who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

As clear as this authority claim is in scripture, we still trip on it. We know that God has power, but we forget that he has authority. His authority over the waves caused them to calm in an instant. His authority over your sin means that when he says it is forgiven it is so. When he declares something, all forces of nature and the spiritual realm obey what he says because he has authority. He has the right to forgive you. He has the right to change you. When he declares healing over you, purpose for you, or transformation within you, his very words make it so because he has authority. If he had power, he might be able to save us by overpowering the enemy and taking us captive. But since he has authority, he is entirely just in saving us and uncontested in setting us free. His authority is what makes scriptures like John 1:12-13 possible, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” His authority gives us the right to become children of God. Because Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth, we need not stumble into the kingdom of God with an imposter syndrome. The supreme authority has fit us to be there.

Notice, Jesus didn’t give a verbal answer to either question. Once again, he was silent. He showed his unconditional love and divine power through action. They sat in the awestruck wonder of unconditional love and divine authority as they looked over the calm seas.

We may see some Galilee faith within us. The good news is that God can grow Galilee faith. An example of these same followers of Jesus gives us hope that faith can grow.

After more time getting to know Jesus, the disciples had another miraculous experience on the water with him. This time Jesus was walking on it. Peter walked to him and sank. He still had small faith. But we see that the small faith had grown by the way the disciples reacted to the experience of the greatness of God. In the story of the calming of the storm we read that they were greatly afraid. Then they questioned who Jesus was. We see a different reaction in the story of Jesus walking on water. Read it in Matthew 14:33, "And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'" Now they worshipped where they once only feared. They affirmed his divinity where they once questioned it. When Galilee faith is faced with the undeniable greatness of God it fears and opposes it. There is a deeper faith that encounters the greatness of God and worships and affirms it. The experience of God's greatness can repel us, or it can invite us. Fear is an appropriate response to greatness but when we know that the great one with divine authority also has unconditional love for us, we desire to be in the presence of his glory. There is a faith that pursues God's beauty, that worships what it doesn't fully comprehend, that holds on to the truth of God's character, that trust his authority, and cannot be dismantled by the wind and the wave.

Experience the greatness of God. Don't stop there. Let it transform your life. Move beyond Galilee faith to something better.

A better faith does not depend on doing better at faith. It is about putting our faith in something better. It is the object of our faith, not the effort, that makes it great. Put your faith in a God of unconditional love and divine authority.