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# Isaiah in Mark

## Lesson 5

### “Mark 4”

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**Objective:** To understand how Isaiah is used by Mark to proclaim the good news to his original audience and to understand how this should be understood by us today. How should the gospel message impact our lives. The historical and cultural barriers often cause us to miss, or even misinterpret the message of Mark. This then inhibits transformation into the image of Christ.

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**Materials:** Books, Journal articles, Targums, the Syriac Peshitta and interviews.

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**Procedures:** To outline the issues that confront us as we seek to comprehend more fully the powerful ways that the Old Testament, and in particular Isaiah challenged and transformed the world-view and the lives of first century believers. In doing this, it is hoped that we can then transform that understanding into a contextual milieu that will allow our lives to be impacted by the Gospel in the powerful, transformative way that it impacted that first audience.

Mark 4:1-34 is the first long speech given by Jesus in the Gospel of Mark; despite the fact that the audience has perhaps heard a good deal about the teaching of Jesus, this is the first teaching of the Gospel that takes place outside the context of controversy. The setting here recalls the context of 3:7-12: where Jesus is beside the sea, and the crowd is so large that he retreats to a boat. Here, once again, we have the introduction of a boat that will be used in numerous crossings of the sea throughout the ministry of Jesus. It is important as we enter this section to be aware that more than a little ink has been spilled in parable scholarship. Much of that ink tells us far more about the interpreters than it does about the texts being interpreted. Despite the fact that there are a number of inflated claims made that parables “subvert” and “shatter” the complacent world of the hearers, this is in reality more often the ambition of the scholar rather than it is the ambition of the author of Mark. Mark uses the term *parable* (παραβολή) in a manner that is consistent with the ordinary understanding of the Greek rhetorical tradition. In Greek rhetorical tradition, a “parable” is a story that could happen

but did not happen, whereas a “fable” is a story which could not happen; fables often involve animals that talk.<sup>1</sup>

Generally speaking, a “parable” is to be understood as a fictional analogy that is used for instructive purposes. The parable, of this chapter, is primarily about eschatology. Mark uses the parables, along with the sayings of Jesus to explain why the proclamation of God’s reign is meeting with resistance and to assure the audience that despite the apparent lack of progress the kingdom of God will eventually burst forth with amazing fruitfulness. A second issue of major concern, in this text, is one that is also present in Mark 13: that is the warning regarding the possibility of apostasy for those hearing the teachings of Jesus. This warning is given not to those outside, but even to those who have already become partakers of God’s grace as mediated through Jesus.<sup>2</sup> One of the major concerns in this section deals with this issue of apostasy. Can apostasy actually take place if indeed the kingdom of God is breaking into the world.<sup>3</sup>

There may be the perception, as there often is today, that no one can

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<sup>1</sup> Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark* (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), pp. 37-38.

<sup>2</sup> Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>3</sup> Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, in *The Anchor Bible series*, Vol. 27 (New Haven CT: The Anchor Yale Bible, 2005), p. 288.

possibly resist the power and will of God. While there is truth in this precept, the application of that power by God, and how it is to be applied, is a major component of the teaching of Jesus and warnings of apostasy and unfaithfulness are a major part of that teaching.

The narrative, thus far, in Mark's Gospel describes the initial proclamation of the kingdom of God, along with the responses that that proclamation has invoked. The responses evoked have been widely varying, ranging from enthusiasm and commitment of the twelve, through to the plot of the Pharisees and the Herodians intent upon the destruction of Jesus. In this section, the "kingdom of God," which has not been mentioned directly since 1:14-15, now comes back into focus. In this chapter, it is described in terms of the audience being given "the mystery of the kingdom of God" (μυστήριον). These words are set between the telling of the parable and its explanation.<sup>4</sup> We need to hold in view the backdrop against which the parable of the sower comes, it comes on the heels of the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. At the very beginning of his Gospel account Mark warned his readers by using

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<sup>4</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), p. 182.

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the passages of Scripture from Malachi, Exodus and Isaiah. Despite the fact that initially the ministry of Jesus seems to begin well with people coming out from the surrounding area to hear him, the response of the Jewish leadership signals an air of foreboding.<sup>5</sup>

When John is imprisoned that event apparently acts as a catalyst for Jesus own ministry, but even that seems to have a stormy aspect to it and provides a sense of foreboding. This initial sense of foreboding quickly takes on a sense of focus as the confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish leadership comes to center stage. The announcement of Jesus as the agent of the devil acts as a watershed moment that will cement the perspective that the leadership are indeed in opposition to the coming kingdom of God.<sup>6</sup> As the stage is set, Jesus now begins to use parables to show the distinction between those who are to be recipients of the kingdom of God and those that will reject it. The parable itself indicates that some are going to accepting and welcome the coming of the kingdom, while others are going to reject it. At Mark 4:9, there is perhaps an allusion

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<sup>5</sup> Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2000), pp. 184-185.

<sup>6</sup> Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*, pp. 185-186.

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to the words of Isaiah 6 and an indication that the words of Jesus bring not only a message of hope, but also that there is warning in his words. It perhaps seems strange to us today that not even the disciples of Jesus understand his words without explanation, but that is the reality of the story told by Mark. Without God's help, even this message is too much for them to comprehend. We must continually insure that our focus is correct as we read Mark; he is proclaiming the "good news" as prophesied by the prophet Isaiah, not the "good news" as filtered, interpreted, and supplemented with modern perceptions and sensibilities in some form of social political correctness.

At 4:10, there is an opportunity for those who were disciples and perhaps those that wanted to be disciples, of Jesus to question him with regard to the parables. We might perhaps wonder why they did not question him in this regard immediately, but to have done so would have been to admit publicly that they were deaf and blind to the words of Jesus. At verse 11, there is further indication that something amazing is unfolding here as he tells them that to them has been given the "mystery of the kingdom of God." The notion of

the “mystery of God” is the revealing of the divinely willed way in which the rule of God will manifest itself, and come to fulfillment through the agency of Jesus. The statement that this mystery has already been given to the inner circle refers to the teaching of Jesus, which they have already heard. The implication here is that the inner circle will be given a more complete revelation of the significance of the teaching than the general audience will receive. This begins to happen as Jesus begins to explain the parable to that inner circle, but not to the wider audience.<sup>7</sup>

Though not a direct quote of Isaiah 6:9-10 in Mark 4:12, Jesus seems to be directly referring back to this passage.<sup>8</sup> The parables of Jesus function in some way as a response to those who have rejected him and become for them an instrument of the judicial blinding and hardening prophesied in Isaiah 6:9-10. The context of Isaiah 6 is set as part of the introduction for Isaiah chapters 1-12. From the beginning of Isaiah judgment is foreshadowed as Yahweh institutes

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<sup>7</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark A Commentary*, in the Hermeneia A Critical and Historical Commentary of the Bible series (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2007), p.

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 6<sup>9</sup> **And he said, “Go and say to this people, listen intently, and do not discern, and look intently, and do not learn. <sup>10</sup> Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy and their eyes blinded lest the people see with their eyes, and with their ears hear, and with their heart understand and return and be healed.”**

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legal proceedings against his faithless people (Isaiah 1:2ff.). They are faithless to their covenant obligations with Yahweh. The case against Israel begins with a twofold thematic statement that highlights the nations faithlessness and culpable, even willful, ignorance. The twin charges against the people in Isaiah is that they have abandoned Yahweh and that they have failed to understand. Their intensified religious observances (Isaiah 1:10-15), are apparently to be interpreted as misguided attempts at remedying their present distress, but such efforts are futile and ignorant. Their activity is multiplied and their traditions are created and enforced as a mask for Israel's distress and failure. They give them a false sense of relief from their pain and distress. Instead, what Yahweh requires is justice (Isaiah 1:16 ff.). He then invites them to reason together with him (Isaiah 1:18-20), even offering salvation (Isaiah 1:19b), if they will repent. He tells them that the consequence of their refusal and their continued disobedience will be their annihilation (Isaiah 1:20).<sup>9</sup>

The complaint of God in the context of Isaiah should not be seen in the context of a court room with God as judge, but in the

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<sup>9</sup> Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*, pp. 187-188.



context of a father trying to deal with rebellious children. As a father he offers them rewards for proper behavior, for true covenant observance, and justice, but they refuse. The promises of blessing by God fall upon deaf ears and hardened hearts. As a result Yahweh laments, in Isaiah 6, that he must instead of bringing blessings bring punishment in order to bring his wayward children to the proper path. He loves them and he will not abandon them, instead he continues to seek relationship with them. Their response is continued rebellion, idolatry, all the while going through the motions of devotion through their traditional observances that occur without the devotion of their hearts. It is to be noted that the primary responsibility for the disobedient acts of the Jewish people in the time of Isaiah was their leadership. As we come to the Gospel of Mark we see that same pattern and we see that God holds those that are leaders particularly responsible. A major theme of Isaiah is that though God repeatedly and constantly sought the obedience of his people they have refused and therefore the judgment that is to come is justified.<sup>10</sup> As we observe the pattern of the ministry of Jesus we

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<sup>10</sup> Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*, pp. 188-190.

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see once again that the same pattern that had existed in the time of Isaiah the prophet still exists and yet still God persists in his efforts to draw his children into obedience. The usage by Jesus of parables acts both as teaching and judgment.

In the parable of the sower an explanation is given as to why the proclamation of the kingdom has a different affect on different people. So often we have made it about how we should respond to the Gospel and yet the focus is not on our choices in responding, but on the reality of different responses. This is meant to provide comfort and challenge to the disciples of Jesus Christ as they proclaim the Gospel. They must recognize that despite the fact that not everyone accepts and believes the Gospel message it does indeed have an affect on everyone. For some it will bring great joy and indeed be the “good news” that God intended it to be, while for others it will start out that way only to be plucked out by Satan even before it can sprout. For some the news will take root and even begin to grow, only to be choked out by the cares and concerns of this life. Things like career, family, wealth and even education. All of these are good things when kept in proper perspective, but they can

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choke out what is truly central and truly crucial even to the point of making these good things of value bad. We must not forget that Jesus continues to focus their attention on the “kingdom of God.” The true success of the kingdom comes to those that are described in terms of being “good soil,” where the produce is bountiful and rich.

He will tell them this parable, give an explanation and then give them further parables that are intended to reinforce his message and challenge them both to understand why the kingdom of God produces a different result among different people, but also to challenge them to be people of faith, trusting in the power and message of God. That faith is demonstrated not through ritual observance only, but through covenant faithfulness in living a life fully aware of one’s covenant obligations with a heart transformed by the gracious love of God. At Mark 4:21 Jesus challenges his audience to understand that the message that he is giving them is not something that can be hidden, but something that must be set on a stand, or on a hill. It must become a part of life not just at church, not just when church people are looking, but in the recesses of life. Some people are great at putting on a show at church and among church friends,

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but they treat their family worse than dirt, they lie, they steal, they curse they live one way on Sunday morning and another way the rest of their life. Some hold to traditions more than they do to justice and for those Jesus tells them that the measure they use to measure others will be used by God to measure them (4:24).

Lest in our arrogance it becomes all about pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps, or about our self-discipline, Jesus tells yet another parable beginning at 4:26 that makes it clear that there is something mysterious about the proclamation of the Gospel. He uses the imagery of the earth growing plants as the backdrop for this.

Sometimes we think through our great scientific advances we are so clever, but in reality all we have done with all of our science is figured out a few things that help the things that God made, and that he makes grow, work efficiently. We have made no new plants without using the building blocks that God placed there for us. Even in this parable there is an element of judgment as it speaks of the harvest. That is the moment of truth. When a farmer grows crops there will at some point come that moment of harvest when all the time, effort, work and mystery are brought into the light. Is the crop abundant?

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Is the crop quality? All of this and more is disclosed at the harvest and Jesus challenges his audience here in the Gospel of Mark in the same way that we find God challenging Israel in the context of the prophecies of Isaiah.

One of the concerns that the audience of Jesus likely had was that the kingdom as it was coming in the ministry of Jesus did not look quite the way they had envisioned it. Very often it is the same today. Today the phenomenon of the Megachurch dominates the horizon of Christianity and yet more and more people are beginning to realize that this phenomenon is just, that a phenomenon: one that provides lots of entertainment and the semblance of health and service, but very often not real community. In an article by Philip Yancey he writes these words:

Henri Nouwen defines "community" as the place where the person you least want to live with always lives. Often we surround ourselves with the people we most want to live with, thus forming a club or a clique, not a community. Anyone can form a club; it

takes grace, shared vision, and hard work to  
form a community.<sup>11</sup>

As we look at the parable that Jesus tells in Mark 4:30-32 we can see that the kingdom of God, though it starts out small, it will be really large. As with most things we can equate that to community too, and there is a certain level of reality to this, but like most things it can be distorted. Jesus had massive crowds following him and he recognized the great need for small groups to disciple. We must realize that the kingdom of God must grow because of what God does and through his ways, or it will be unhealthy, unspiritual, and it will fail. In a recent article in the *Huffington Post* megachurches are the topic. Tim Suttle writes in his blog in September of 2011:

The mega-church model which was the  
flavor of the week in church leadership  
circles for decades is now beginning to  
crumble. Financial troubles forced Rick  
Warren to send a desperate plea for money  
to his Saddleback congregation two years

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<sup>11</sup> Philip Yancey, "Why I Don't Go to a Megachurch," *Christianity Today*, May 20 (1996) 40:6.

ago. A Kansas City mega-church just lost their 20 million dollar campus to the bank. One of the country's first mega-churches, the Crystal Cathedral, recently filed for bankruptcy, and these stories are becoming more and more common. Yet, could it be that financial problems are just the symptom of a much deeper issue?<sup>12</sup>

We see what is taught in the Parable of Jesus in Mark and yet, like in the instance of Abraham trying to help God in the birth of Isaac we try to help God along, or perhaps believe that God is blessing us because of massive numbers. If we are not careful we replace the reality of what God calls us to, and intended for us, with a human version of success. Please do not hear me saying that in the case of Megachurches falsehood and failure are always the case, but please do hear me say that if a church is not a Megachurch it certainly does not mean that a church is failing in their kingdom mission. There are also unique pitfalls to the Megachurch such as the fact that: “Mega-

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tim-suttle/the-failure-of-the-megachurch\\_b\\_954482.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tim-suttle/the-failure-of-the-megachurch_b_954482.html)

church size insulates the body from the natural pains and tensions which keep it healthy. Pain is good, even in the church. Pain forces a community and its leaders to grow deeper and more mature.” In addition to this, “Mega-church size inhibits diversity. Pastors flock to mega-church conferences attempting to copy the latest leadership techniques and strategies.” “Mega-church size exploits the mega-church pastor. The mega-church pastor becomes like the liver of an alcoholic body. The anxiety, pressure, and stress generated by the mega-church is not shared by the typical member but is focused primarily upon the pastor. This pressure molds the pastor into something more akin to a CEO of a large corporation than a wise rabbi.”<sup>13</sup>

The message of Jesus in his parable regarding the mustard seed growing into a large plant is not the message that all churches should be Megachurches in order to be successful participants in the Kingdom of God. The message of parable is that the dominion of God will continue to exist in a state of hiddenness that makes it mysterious (4:11), not readily apparent (4:3-8), and difficult to

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<sup>13</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tim-suttle/the-failure-of-the-megachurch\\_b\\_954482.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tim-suttle/the-failure-of-the-megachurch_b_954482.html)



describe. The initial inconspicuousness of the kingdom of God will ultimately be replaced by the full dominion of the kingdom of God. It will grow and despite the confrontation and even the apparent destruction of the small seed, the kingdom of God will grow. In this section Jesus is preparing his disciples for the resistance that they will face. Despite the small size of the kingdom, there is hope that it will one day grow into this huge plant.<sup>14</sup> The kingdom of God will ultimately become the greatest of all the kingdoms and in the interim what is needed is hope, faith and obedience. Mark ends this section letting his audience know that Jesus continued to speak to his disciples in parables and that he explained the parables to those disciples.

At Mark 4:35, we move to a story of crossing the Sea of Galilee that will put into context all that has gone before and link powerfully the ministry of Jesus with the prophecies of Isaiah and others that foretold the coming of God to his people. In this section, the disciples will be confronted with the realization that God is truly with them (Emmanuel). In Mark 4:35-41, Jesus will rebuke the stormy Sea

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<sup>14</sup> Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, in *The Anchor Bible series*, Vol. 27, pp. 329-330.


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of Galilee that threatens the disciples with death and he transforms it from a barrier separating Jew and Gentile into a bridge. The message of the sea crossings and the exorcisms is to reinforce the message of the parables: “God’s eschatological victory over Satan is being manifested proleptically in the ministry of Jesus. The battle with Satan has already been won at one level, but it is ongoing at another.”<sup>15</sup> We must recognize that the message of the parables is being brought to life in the miracles. The Jews in particular feared the sea and associated it particularly with the work of Satan and the forces of chaos. In Genesis 1:2 we have these words: “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” Jesus directly confronts the full force of Satan and in a fashion that can only be described with ease, he commands forces that were beyond the control of human beings.

In the moment that Jesus does this he reinforces the message of his parables as not just the words of a man, not just opinions, but they are words from God. The storm is not simply a weather

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<sup>15</sup> Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark*, p. 53.



phenomenon for Mark, or his audience; he makes it clear that there is a supernatural element to this storm. It is important to notice that Jesus does not rebuke the disciple's fear because they are afraid of a storm and have never seen one before. Storms are common on the Sea of Galilee. He rebukes them because of their lack of confidence in him. Their fear is that the power of Jesus is not greater than the power of the forces of destruction.<sup>16</sup> Are there not times when we have the same fears? Jesus calls upon his disciples to have faith, confidence, in him, in the face of all the forces of chaos and evil. This is ultimately the main point of this entire section. Jesus calls his disciples to trust in him, to follow him, and to be obedient to him. The call of Jesus is the same call that God made to Israel in the prophecies, especially of Isaiah. The "good news" is that the day has come when God introduces the kingdom.

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<sup>16</sup> Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark*, pp. 53-54.

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# Synopsis

As we come to Mark chapter 4, we come to the first long section of teaching given by Jesus that is not in the context of conflict with the Jewish religious leaders. The teaching here is in parables and certainly there has been a considerable amount written with regard to parables. Often what has been written about parables says more about the modern author than it does about the actual meaning of the parables of Jesus. Jesus uses parables very much in a manner that would have been traditional for his time and culture. Though the message may be very countercultural in regard to the leadership of his time, it is in reality taught in a manner that would have been quite familiar to his audience.

The primary teachings in the parables of Jesus, in this section, have to do with eschatology and the dangers of apostasy. In some sense the issue of apostasy is actually primary. Some were likely concerned that the kingdom of God, that Jesus was preaching, did not fit with what they imagined it would be, and therefore they were possibly having doubts. The teaching that

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Jesus gives here is intended to explain what is happening in order to bolster their faith and confidence. It is perhaps important for us to remember that all of the warnings and teachings of Jesus come in the context of a message delivered to those who are insiders, they are actually Jews. The warning is to those who should already be beneficiaries of the grace of God; this is not a warning to outsiders.

The audience is likely concerned because the responses to the proclamation of the kingdom of God have varied widely and it is likely that this is a tremendous surprise. To counter this surprise, and to provide reassurance, especially to those who have accepted the message of Jesus, explanation is given in the form of parables. In part parables are used because this was a common teaching technique, but in part, parables are used because the message requires explanation from Jesus and it provides him an opportunity to separate those who are going to be disciples and those who are not. For those who are disciples, explanation will come, for those who are not disciples this same message will be a message of judgment. This certainly fits well with the background of Isaiah as a backdrop for the message of Mark. Certainly Isaiah

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chapters 1-12 deliver this message and it is especially prominent at chapter 6 of Isaiah.

God works to draw his children back into their covenant obligations and to insure that their devotion to the covenant is truly from the heart. Certainly in the time of Isaiah, and the time since that time, the Jewish people realized that things were not as they should be with regard to their covenant relationship with God. To deal with this discomfort and brokenness, the Jews had sought to rectify this through religious ritual observance and traditions. Instead, what God desired, and what was needed, was justice. Jesus, in each parable tries to focus the attention of his audience on faithfulness while explaining that for some the Gospel would bring judgement.

As part of the support for understanding that the words of Jesus are not just the words of an ordinary man, but from God we have the story of the calming of the sea. This miracle reiterates and reinforces the message of the parables. This miracle indicates the nature, the power, and the authority of Jesus.

# Questions

1. What do you think it means when large crowds come to an event?
2. What is usually your response to teaching that you do not understand? Why?
3. Can you remember a time when something you were involved with began successfully, but then became less successful? How did you feel when that happened?
4. Why do you think people are often discouraged when success begins to wane?
5. What do you think it means in verse 6 for the plant that sprung up to wither away?
6. What does it mean to apostatize?
7. Why do you think that God allows things to happen that are not good?
8. What do you think the teaching in Mark four says about the will of God in the lives of people?
9. What is the kingdom of God?
10. What is the “secret,” or “mystery” of the kingdom of God?

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11. How do you think the cares of this world affect the kingdom of God for us as individuals, and as a nation?
  12. How does the kingdom of God come about?
  13. What do you think the calming of the storm in Mark 4 tells us about Jesus?
  14. How do you think the way that God measures success might be different from the way that we as humans measure success?
  15. What is the most important message that you think we should take away from Mark 4? Why?
  16. How is faith connected with understanding?
  17. Can we cause faith to grow, or is that only something that God can do?
  18. What purpose do you think the words of warning that Jesus gives to his disciples have?