

Christ in the Vessel.

Mark 4: 35-41.

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"Man's extremity is God's opportunity." This is a very familiar saying. It often passes among us; and, no doubt, we fully believe it; but yet, when we find ourselves brought to our extremity, we are often very little prepared to count on God's opportunity. It is one thing to utter or hearken to a truth, and another thing to realize the power of that truth. It is one thing, when sailing over a calm sea, to speak of God's ability to keep us in the storm, and it is another thing altogether to prove that ability when the storm is actually raging around us. And yet God is ever the same. In the storm and in the calm, in sickness and in health, in pressure and in ease, in poverty and in abundance, "the same yesterday, and to-day, and forever" — the same grand reality for faith to lean upon, cling to and draw upon, at all times and under all circumstances.

But alas, we are unbelieving! Here lies the source of weakness and failure. We are perplexed and agitated, when we ought to be calm and confiding; we are casting about, when we ought to be counting on God; we are "beckoning to our partners," when we ought to be looking unto Jesus. thus it is we lose immensely, and dishonour the Lord in our ways. Doubtless there are few things for which we have to be more deeply humbled than our tendency to distrust the Lord when difficulties and trials present themselves; and assuredly we grieve the heart of Jesus by thus distrusting Him, for distrust must always wound a loving heart. Look, for example, at the scene between Joseph and his brethren in Genesis 50.

"And when Joseph's brethren saw that their father was dead, they said, Joseph will peradventure hate us, and will certainly requite us all the evil which we did unto him. And they sent a messenger unto Joseph, saying, Thy father did command before he died, saying, So shall ye say unto Joseph, Forgive, I pray thee now, the trespass of thy brethren, and their sin; for they did unto thee evil: and now, we pray thee, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of thy father. And Joseph wept when they spake unto him."

It was a sad return for the love and tender care which Joseph had exercised towards them. How could they suppose that one who had so freely and fully forgiven them, and spared their lives when they were entirely in his power, would, after so many years of kindness, turn upon them in anger and revenge? It was indeed a grievous wrong, and it was no marvel that "Joseph wept when they spake unto him." What an answer to all their unworthy fear and dark suspicion! A flood of tears! Such is love! "And Joseph said unto them, Fear not: for am I in the place of God? But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive. Now therefore, fear ye not: *I will nourish you, and your little ones.* And he comforted them, and spake kindly unto them. "

Thus was it with the disciples on the occasion to which our paper refers. Let us meditate a little on the passage.

"And the same day, when the even was come, Jesus saith unto them, Let us pass over unto the other side. And when they had sent away the multitude, they took Him even as He was in the ship; and there were also with Him other little ships. And there arose a great storm of wind, and the waves beat into the ship, so that it was now full. And He was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow."

Here, then, we have an interesting and instructive scene. The poor disciples are brought to their

extremity. They are at their wits' end. A violent storm — the ship full of water — the Master asleep. This was a trying moment indeed, and assuredly we, if we look at ourselves, need not marvel at the fear and agitation of the disciples. It is not likely that we should have done better had we been there. Still, we cannot but see wherein they failed. The narrative has been penned for our learning, and we are bound to study it, and seek to learn the lesson which it reads out to us .

There is nothing more absurd and irrational than unbelief when we come to look at it calmly. In the scene before us this absurdity is very apparent; for what could be more absurd than to suppose that the vessel could possibly sink with the Son of God on board? And yet this was what they feared. It may be said they did not just think of the Son of God at that moment. True, they thought of the storm, the waves, the filling vessel, and, judging after the manner of men, it seemed a hopeless case. Thus it is the unbelieving heart ever reasons. It looks only at the circumstances, and leaves God out. Faith, on the contrary, looks only at God, and leaves circumstances out.

What a difference! Faith delights in man's extremity, simply because it is God's opportunity. It delights in being "shut up" to God — in having the platform thoroughly cleared of the creature, in order that God may display His glory — in the multiplying of "empty vessels," in order that God may fill them. Such is faith. It would, we may surely say, have enabled the disciples to lie down and sleep beside their Master in the midst of the storm. Unbelief, on the other hand, rendered them uneasy; they could not rest themselves, and they actually aroused the blessed Lord out of His sleep by their unbelieving apprehensions. He, weary with incessant toil, was snatching a few moments repose while the vessel was crossing the sea. He knew what fatigue was; He had come down into all our circumstances. He made Himself acquainted with all our feelings and all our infirmities, being in all points tempted like as we are, sin excepted.

He was found as a man in every respect, and as such He slept on a pillow, rocked by the waves of the sea. The storm and the billows beat upon the vessel, although the Creator was on board, in the person of that weary, sleeping Workman.

Profound mystery! The One who made the sea, and could hold the winds in His almighty grasp, lay sleeping in the hinder part of the ship, and allowed the sea and the wind to treat Him as unceremoniously as though He were an ordinary man. Such was the reality of the human nature of our blessed Lord. He was weary — He slept, being tossed on the bosom of that sea which His hands had made. O pause and meditate on this wondrous sight. Look closely, think upon it. We cannot expatiate upon the scene; we can only muse and worship.

But, as we have said, unbelief roused the blessed Lord out of His sleep. "They awake Him, and say unto Him, Master, *carest Thou not* that we perish?" What a question! "*Carest Thou not?*" How it must have wounded the sensitive heart of the Lord! How could they ever think that He was indifferent to their trouble and danger? How completely must they have lost sight of His love, to say nothing of His power, when they could bring themselves to say, "*Carest Thou not?*"

And yet, have we not in all this a mirror in which to see ourselves reflected? Assuredly we have. How often, in moments of pressure and trial, do our hearts conceive, if our lips do not utter the question, "*Carest Thou not?*" It may be we are laid on a bed of sickness and pain, and we know that one word from the God of all power and might could chase away the malady and raise us up; and yet the word is withheld. Or perhaps we are in need of temporal supplies, and we know that the silver and gold, and the cattle upon a thousand hills, belong to God — yea, that the treasures of the universe are under His hand — and yet day after day rolls on, and our need is not supplied. In a word, we are passing through deep waters, in some way or another; the storm rages, wave after wave rolls over our

tiny vessel, we are brought to our extremity, we are at our wits' end, and our hearts often feel ready to send up the terrible question, "Carest Thou not?" The thought of this is deeply humbling. To think of our grieving the loving heart of Jesus by our unbelief and suspicion should fill us with the deepest contrition.

And then the absurdity of unbelief! How can that One who gave His life for us — who left His glory and came down into this world of toil and misery and died a shameful death to deliver us from eternal wrath — how can such a One ever fail to care for us? But yet we are ready to doubt, or we grow impatient under the trial of our faith, forgetting that the very trial from which we so shrink and under which we so wince is far more precious than gold, for the former is an imperishable reality, whereas the latter must perish in the using. The more genuine faith is tried, the brighter it shines; and hence the trial, however severe, is sure to issue in praise and honour and glory to Him who not only implants the faith, but also passes it through the furnace and sedulously watches it therein.

But the poor disciples failed in the moment of trial. Their confidence gave way, they roused their Master from His slumber with that most unworthy question, "Carest Thou not that we perish?" Alas, what creatures we are! We are ready to forget ten thousand mercies in the presence of a single difficulty. David could say, "I shall one day perish by the hand of Saul"; and how did it turn out? Saul fell on mount Gilboa, and David was established on the throne of Israel. Elijah fled for his life at the threat of Jezebel; and what was the issue? Jezebel was dashed to pieces on the pavement, and Elijah was taken to Heaven in a chariot of fire. So here, the disciples thought they were going to be lost, with the Son of God on board; and what was the result? The storm was hushed into silence, and the sea became as glass, by that Voice which of old had called worlds into existence. "And He arose and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm."

What a combination of grace and majesty is here! Instead of rebuking them for having disturbed His repose, He rebukes those elements which had terrified them. It was thus He replied to their question, "Carest Thou not?" Blessed Master! Who would not trust Thee? Who would not adore Thee for Thy patient grace and unupbraiding love?

There is something perfectly beautiful in the way in which our blessed Lord rises, without an effort, from the repose of perfect humanity into the activity of essential deity. As man, wearied with His work, He slept on a pillow; as God, He rises, and, with His almighty voice, hushes the storm and calms the sea.

Such was Jesus — very God and very man — and such He is now, ever ready to meet His people's need, to hush their anxieties and remove their fears. Oh that we trusted Him more simply! We have little idea of how much we lose by not leaning more on the arm of Jesus, day by day. We are so easily terrified. Every breath of wind, every wave, every cloud, agitates and depresses us. Instead of calmly lying down and reposing beside our Lord, we are full of terror and perplexity. Instead of using the storm as an occasion for trusting Him, we make it an occasion for doubting Him. No sooner does some trifling trouble arise than we think we are going to perish, although He assures us that He has numbered the very hairs of our head. Well may He say to us as He said to His disciples, "Why are ye so fearful? How is it that ye have no faith?"

It would indeed seem at times as though we had no faith. But oh, His tender love! He is ever near to shield and succour us, even though our unbelieving hearts are so ready to doubt His Word. He does not deal with us according to our poor thoughts of Him, but according to His own perfect love toward us. This is the solace and stay of our souls in passing across life's stormy sea homeward to our eternal

rest. Christ is in the vessel. Let this ever suffice. Let us calmly rely on Him. May there ever be, at the very centre of our hearts, that deep repose which springs from real trust in Jesus! and then, though the storm rage and the sea run mountains high, we shall not be led to say, "Carest Thou not that we perish?" Is it possible we can perish with the Master on board? or can we ever think so with Christ in our hearts? May the Holy Spirit teach us to make a fuller, freer, bolder use of Christ! We really want this just now, and shall want it more and more. It must be Christ Himself, laid hold of and enjoyed in the heart by faith. Thus may it be to His praise and our abiding peace and joy!

We may just notice, in conclusion, the way in which the disciples were affected by the scene on which we have been dwelling. Instead of the calm worship of those whose faith had been answered, they manifest the amazement of those whose fears had been rebuked. "They feared exceedingly, and said one to another, What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?" Surely they ought to have known Him better. Yes, and so should we.