

...be our Rescuer

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[0 : 00] Earlier this year, I was in Israel, as some of you know, and I preached this passage while we were sailing on the Sea of Galilee. And I think there's a photo of it, Paul, in the next slide.

That's me on a boat doing it. And this was a sea that Jesus found it easier to walk on rather than sail on. And the next photo, that was the sea that day.

It's like glass, really quite smooth that day. Thanks, Paul. And in my head while I was preaching, in my head I thought a really good preacher would illustrate this passage by actually trying to walk on the water.

But in my heart, I wasn't brave enough for the cold. I'm not sure whether head or heart was right that day. Lots of people know in their heads that Christmas has something to do with Jesus.

But in their hearts, it's the presents and the food and the summer holidays that they care about. The issue in our passage today is one of head and hearts.

[1 : 02] And we looked at this story back in February when we were in John's Gospel. But unlike John, Mark uses the same story to teach us about head and hearts.

He includes some very curious things and a sting in the tail. So please keep your Bibles open. And there's also a handout, which will really help you today.

There's the handout and the Bible. So I'll tell you the story again briefly. Jesus has just fed 5,000 people with some fish and loaves. And now he needs some alone time.

And so he dismisses the crowds. He made the disciples go on ahead by boat to Bethsaida. But the disciples don't get very far until they're stuck out at sea.

And so Jesus walks on water to help them. And here is the first curious thing in verse 51. Have a look. Then he climbed into the boat with them and the wind died down.

[2 : 00] They were completely amazed for they had not understood about the loaves. You see, we expect Mark to say they had not understood how he could walk on water.

But it's the loaves that they don't get. Verse 52 begins with the word for or because. The disciples are amazed how Jesus could walk on water because they were baffled how he could feed 5,000 people.

In other words, if they understood how he fed 5,000 people, they wouldn't be so confused when they see him taking a stroll on the sea. Mark deliberately links the feeding of the 5,000 and the walking on water.

Can you think of another event in the Bible that has a miraculous sea crossing and a miraculous bread as well? Don't be shy, but it's the it's the Exodus story, isn't it?

When God rescued his people from Egypt. Remember, God parted the sea and then produced manna or bread from heaven. And the table on your handout is kind of a cheat, really.

[3 : 11] It shows you all of those comparisons and the workings. I won't go through all the table, but just a couple of the points. So halfway down. Just as Moses went up on a mountain to speak with God.

So Jesus, verse 46, went up on a mountainside to pray. Both miracles occur at nighttime in Exodus. God spent all night blowing the Red Sea apart.

And here, verse 48, Jesus set out shortly before dawn. The main miracle, of course, just as Moses crosses the sea in miraculous fashion, so too Jesus in spectacular style.

You can imagine both of them in heaven. Moses says, yeah, I walked through the sea. And Jesus says, that's nothing, mate. I walked right on top of it instead.

Lots of people try to explain away biblical miracles. They say, well, maybe Jesus was walking on a sandbar or maybe it was low tide or a shallow part of the Sea of Galilee.

[4 : 10] A team of U.S. and Israeli scientists said, actually, a combination of weather and water produced a thin layer of ice. And that is how, you know, Jesus was able to do what he did.

It's a test of head and heart, isn't it? Because in our heads, we know the laws of physics state. You cannot walk on water at room temperature. But in our hearts, we still believe that Jesus is Lord, even over the wind and the water.

But if God wanted to get our attention, can you think of a better way than to bend the laws of physics that he wrote, even if for a moment?

Can you think of a better way to get our attention? There's another curious thing in verse 48. Verse 48 says, It's curious that Jesus went out to help them, but then appears to pass by them instead. But back in Exodus, when God wanted to show that he was on Moses' side, he allowed his glory to pass by him. And so, too, when Jesus wants to show he's on the disciples' side, he does the same thing.

[5 : 29] You see, just as God showed up in Exodus to deliver his people, so now Jesus arrives to do the same thing. Jesus is the rescuer.

And here is Mark's point. In Exodus, God saves his people from slavery for a promised land. Jesus arrives to save his people from slavery to sin for a new promised land.

And I've put that table at the bottom of your handout. Sorry, that underneath the table, there's an equation there. You see, the Exodus from Egypt is the biggest rescue in the Bible until now, when Jesus shows up doing very similar things.

It seems he's bringing another rescue. In fact, the Old Testament prophets, they speak of a shepherd who will bring a greater exodus. Jesus is the rescuer from sin for a new creation.

It's rescue with a capital R. And all that is quite neat, isn't it? The table on your handout, it's pretty convincing stuff. We could just sort of put a bow on it and leave it there.

[6 : 40] But what are we to do with that information? You see, we're not free to interpret the Bible any way we choose. John uses this story to challenge the type of rescue Jesus brings.

But Mark is quite different. And Mark shows us how we are to interpret this information. This is the sting in the tail. And it's the last reference to Exodus.

This is point two. The sting is there in verse 52. I wonder if you spotted the sting. For they had not understood about the loaves. Their hearts were hardened.

Do you remember a character in Exodus whose heart was hardened? That's Pharaoh, wasn't it? We saw him in our first reading. Pharaoh is the archetype of God's enemy in the world.

And Pharaoh's rejection of God was not due to a lack of evidence. He saw the plagues. He saw the signs and wonders. His head had all the evidence it needed to repent and believe.

[7 : 45] But his heart was hardened to God. And so he rejected him and faced his judgment instead. If today we're looping things back to Exodus, Pharaoh is the last character you want to be in the story.

But shockingly, it's the one Jesus uses or associates with his disciples. Their hearts were hardened too. You see, two weeks ago, the disciples saw Jesus heal a demon-possessed man.

Last week, they saw him bring Jairus' daughter back from the dead. They saw him feed 5,000.

Today, they saw him, verse 49, When they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost.

They cried out, verse 50, because they all saw him and were terrified. A lack of evidence isn't the issue. But Mark says they still didn't understand.

Because, verse 52, their hearts were hardened. And that is the sting for us today. Because verse 52 says it is possible to look like a disciple of Jesus, for us to go to church, to read your Bibles, to pray, to know it all and still be hard-hearted about Jesus.

[9 : 03] A few years ago, Rachel and I were having a Saturday brunch in a cafe. And there was an older gentleman sitting near us. And, you know, modern, trendy cafes are all these big, long tables. And you all sit with strangers and things.

And you eat your smashed avocado and stuff. Anyway, there was this older gentleman sitting next to us. And he was by himself. And so Rex and I thought we'd say hello to him. He was a perfectly lovely man.

He was a really nice guy. And somehow or other, he told us that he was a churchgoer. And he told us he'd been a lifelong Anglican. And he was currently serving on the church council.

That's code for Anglican brownie points. Anyway. But he leaned into me and he said, He said, you know, you know none of this is real, right?

You know it's all just a story, don't you? And I was totally shocked. I thought, how could someone be around Jesus their whole lives and still be in the dark, still be hard-hearted about him?

[10:06] Here is a gentleman. He looked like a good Anglican on the outside. But actually, according to this passage, he resembled a mini pharaoh. And that man, he proves the warning of verse 52.

We can look like disciples of Jesus, but still be totally confused or misled and ultimately hard-hearted about who Jesus is and what he has come to do.

Remember the rescue from sin for a new creation. And as always with warnings in the Bible, we need to be careful. Before I start blazing away and accusing you all of being pharaohs, we need to be careful.

Remember that Jesus let his glory pass by the disciples to show he was on their side. I'm on your side as well. And what Mark does is give us two examples, or two more examples, of what hard-heartedness looks like.

And I've put them as examples B and C on your handout. So to help us, can you turn back one page to chapter 6, verse 7? And the heading, Jesus sends out the 12.

[11:23] This is the example for people who are not Jesus' disciples, for non-Christians. And so briefly, the story goes, Jesus sends out 12 apostles from village to village.

And when it came to their message, there are only two options. It's either welcome him, verse 10, or reject him, verse 11.

In other words, we cannot sit on the fence when it comes to Jesus' message. Either repent or reject. If you're not a Christian here today, they are your options.

Either repent, put your trust in Jesus, allow him to be your rescuer, to save you from sin, or harden your hearts.

Continue to reject him in your life. Exodus tells us that this was the choice that Pharaoh made, and so he faced judgment. And he will do so in eternity, along with all the enemies of God.

[12:24] And I don't know how you feel about only having two options. Maybe you feel either repent or face judgment is not really a choice at all. But remember that choosing repentance leads to being rescued.

It's enormously positive. You should know that lots of people in this church are praying for God to soften your heart. We're praying that you would choose Jesus and choose repentance, so you will be forgiven.

We would love to be your church family to support you as you make that decision. The third example, example C, is for the rest of us who are Jesus' disciples.

And that's the story in verse 14 to 30 of John the Baptist beheaded by King Herod. And again, just briefly, Herod, he was a mess when it came to God.

His head and his heart were all over the place. On one hand, verse 17, he gave orders to have John the Baptist arrested and put in prison. And verse 18, because John had been saying to Herod, it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.

[13:31] But on the other hand, verse 20, over the page, Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. Verse 20 says he was greatly puzzled by John's teaching, but liked listening to him.

You see, Herod, this is the point, Herod had a both and approach to God. He wanted to have both John and his teaching in his life and his sinful relationship as well.

And so he refused to repent, but hardened his heart. And this is the danger, because we're happy to repent most of the time.

Lots of us have given up a lot for Jesus and his sake, which is terrific. But maybe, maybe there are things that we want to hold on to.

Maybe there are things which up here we know are sinful, but down here, we just cannot let go of. Perhaps we allow small compromises to repentance, to have a both Jesus and our, you know, acceptable sin.

[14:40] The warning here is that without a heartfelt repentance, we might end up looking like Herod and ultimately Pharaoh.

And I realize that is quite a harsh thing to say, because a lot of us would say, well, we really like Jesus. We really like listening to him. And that is Mark's point, because even Herod like listening to John as well.

Herod, at the start of his birthday banquet, he never planned on beheading John, but his unrepentance spiraled out of control into a gruesome monster that did a terrible thing.

The danger here of trying both Jesus and my sin is that unrepentance spirals out of control into a gruesome end, a gruesome monster.

Friends of mine who've been in ministry for a long time, they tell me that the single greatest cause of Christians falling away is a sinful relationship and sexual immorality.

[15 : 45] It's the biggest single cause of Christians hardening their heart, trying to have a both-and approach to Jesus. Maybe for you it's not relationships or sexual sin, but maybe something else such as gossip or anger or ego.

Maybe we try to compromise both Jesus and just a little bit of that other stuff that we cannot give up. Well, here are two examples today. Either repent or be judged.

Example two, trying to have both Jesus and our sin has a gruesome end. Pretty tough stuff, isn't it? This was supposed to be an Advent talk.

I'm sorry if it hasn't felt very Christmassy. Let me clean that up right now. Let me ask you a question. Who will be the hero of your Christmas? I can already tell you two of my heroes this year. Andrew Price is one of them. He's going to kill me for this, but he's warned me twice not to say this, but he's out there and I'm in here and I've got the microphone. You can fire me in the new year.

[16 : 49] That's fine. Andrew Price is going to do so much work between here and St. John's. He's probably not going to get a chance to eat, so if you can, put some turkey in a Tupperware container and we don't want him being malnourished, do we?

The other hero of my Christmas is Rachel there, my wife. Two young children, six months pregnant. She hasn't got a moment's peace. She's organising our family lunch and she has to put up with me, so well done, darling.

Now, obviously, for Christians, the hero of our Christmas is the Lord Jesus, obviously. We all say that really cheesy line, he's the reason for the season, you know, it's so cheesy, but haven't we given that a few more levels this morning?

Because that first Christmas, God's rescue, capital R, the rescue began from sin for a promised land.

And maybe your head already knows all that. Maybe your heart believes it too. But if God's word is still relevant to you, here's my application.

[17 : 58] Why not spend 15 minutes this season reflecting on who Jesus is and his rescue in your life? If that moves your belief even one sort of floor lower in your heart, that would be a Christmas worth celebrating.

While you're at it, why not do a little soul-searching to see if there are any small compromises to repentance, to see if there is a both-and approach, both Jesus and a little bit of my sin, a compromise like that.

Why not do a little bit of soul-searching like that? And then the option is either repent or harden your hearts at your peril. There are some head and heart things to help us get the most out of Christmas this year.

I'm going to pray that we would do that. Lord Jesus, we declare that you are the rescuer, that you have come to bring the better exodus from sin for a better promised land.

And Lord Jesus, please help us not to harden our hearts. Please soften our hearts by your Spirit. Help us to reflect if there is any sin we're desperate to hold on to.

[19 : 21] Maybe a relationship, maybe something else. Please, Lord Jesus, would we not harden our hearts but repent fully. Please would we give our whole lives to you.

Please would we remember what you gave up for us. And we ask these things so you would be glorified. Amen.