

Matthew 8:18 – 34

Mt.8:18 Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to depart to the other side of the sea. ¹⁹ Then a scribe came and said to him, ‘Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.’ ²⁰ Jesus said to him, ‘The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’ ²¹ Another of the disciples said to him, ‘Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father.’ ²² But Jesus said to him, ‘Follow me, and allow the dead to bury their own dead.’

²³ When he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. ²⁴ And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being covered with the waves; but Jesus himself was asleep. ²⁵ And they came to him and woke him, saying, ‘Save us, Lord; we are perishing!’ ²⁶ He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid, you men of little faith?’ Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and it became perfectly calm. ²⁷ The men were amazed, and said, ‘What kind of a man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?’

²⁸ When he came to the other side into the country of the Gadarenes, two men who were demon-possessed met him as they were coming out of the tombs. They were so extremely violent that no one could pass by that way. ²⁹ And they cried out, saying, ‘What business do we have with each other, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?’ ³⁰ Now there was a herd of many swine feeding at a distance from them. ³¹ The demons began to entreat him, saying, ‘If you are going to cast us out, send us into the herd of swine.’ ³² And he said to them, ‘Go!’ And they came out and went into the swine, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and perished in the waters. ³³ The herdsmen ran away, and went to the city and reported everything, including what had happened to the demoniacs. ³⁴ And behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw him, they implored him to leave their region.

Cultural Background

- In v.21 – 22, ‘let me go and bury my father’ means to wait for the ceremonial time between his father’s first burial and his second. In the first burial, the family placed his body in a tomb. In the second, after the flesh had disappeared, about one year later, the family gathered his bones and placed them in a chest. This was a cultural idiom. It’s not as if his dad is going to have a funeral anytime soon. This person was asking permission to not follow Jesus into the Gentile region.

Questions

1. If you had to put paragraph breaks in, where would you place them? Ok, now: We're going to look for the connections between these passages (the three substories).
 2. The sayings of discipleship (v.18 – 22)
 - a. When Jesus sees the crowd (v.18), how come he doesn't just build a church building and plant a big church?
 - b. What is on the other side of the sea, in v.18? The Gentiles.
 - c. What does that mean for Jews?
 - d. What does it mean to have a home/hole/nest? Why would Jesus say that would not have a home here in this world?
 - e. How does that relate to reaching the Gentiles?
 - f. What does it feel like to be not tied to anything like a home? How is it challenging? Freeing?
 - g. What are ways we try to put culture and ceremony before Jesus, and before his mission?
 - h. Verse 22: explain more, give positives
 - i. How might the 'Jewish family ideal' prevent the mission of Jesus from reaching the Gentiles? What are some 'communities' – real or constructed – that prevent us from following Jesus farther into his mission to the world?
 3. The stormy sea (v.23 – 27):
 - a. What surprises you about this story?
 - b. Jesus had said that he would have no home in which to rest his head. Where is he resting his head?
 - c. How can Jesus sleep through a wind-storm like this?
 - d. What do the disciples know about the Sea of Galilee?
 - i. The fishermen sailed it all their lives.
 - ii. Why is the Sea of Galilee so windy and stormy? Because the mountains around it make it a natural wind tunnel. To be caught on the surface of the lake during a wind-storm is to throw your life away.
 - iii. KEY POINT: The Gentiles live on the other side. It's a physical barrier representing a deeper social and religious one.
 - e. What are all the emotions they're feeling when the storm hits?
 - f. KEY INSIGHT: Jesus brings us beyond a predictable life. He calls us into unpredictability. Note: Jesus in the last scene challenged our desire for security and family. This is bound to be hard for us. Perhaps Jesus makes our family situation more difficult, because now that he's in our lives, our parents don't really like it. Or maybe Jesus makes our time at school more difficult because we have new and frightening questions about what's an appropriate motivation. In addition, Jesus calls us to reinterpret our entire worldview, so that we place his word and his mission first in our lives. This makes our life a bit more unpredictable, too.
 - i. APPLICATION: What storms have we hit, or could we hit, as we join ourselves to this Jesus who wants to cross the sea to reach the Gentiles across the way? Resistant parents? Scoffing friends? Social conflict? Internal prejudices and fears? Discuss a few.
 - ii. Specifically, a storm occurs when Jesus pushes us beyond boundaries that we had set up for our own self-protection. *The storm does NOT represent any personal and generic hardship.*
 - g. What is Jesus doing here, by speaking and calming the chaotic sea? Saying that he has divine authority, that he is God, that his word is all powerful. If we connect this thought to the previous section, the healings by Jesus' word, what do we get? A portrayal of Jesus' word that is powerful enough to bring forth new life, as in a new creation.
 - i. Creation after the waters: Genesis 1
 - ii. New creation after the flood: Genesis 6 – 9
 - iii. God's rule over the waters: Psalm 89:8 – 9
- ⁸ O LORD God of hosts, who is like You, O mighty LORD?
Your faithfulness also surrounds You.
- ⁹ You rule the swelling of the sea;
When its waves rise, You still them. (Psalm 89:8 – 9)

- h. Instead, the disciples say, ‘Who is this?’ How should the disciples have known Jesus? That he is ultimately on the side of life? That Jesus would have brought them alive either way? From the healing of the leper, the centurion’s servant, and the sick.
 - i. When Jesus says, “Men of little faith?” in v.26, what is he expecting the disciples to have believed about him?
 - i. That Jesus is ultimately on the side of life, and would have brought them through alive.
 - ii. That he is God. Who else spoke into wind and waves and created order and life? God in Genesis 1
 - j. If you are in a storm now, or even if you have come through one, to what extent does Jesus himself seem familiar or unfamiliar to you now? Note: Let people feel like it is normal to feel that way. After all, the disciples feel that way at the end of this story. Confusion is okay. It’s normal to feel like the storm is overwhelming. What’s important to know is Jesus will give us life as he calls us into his mission.
4. The demoniacs
- a. We can explore what life would have been like for the demoniacs, but let’s think about how the disciples experienced this event. Let’s view it from their eyes.
 - b. How are the two demon-possessed men like the storm they had just experienced? What words and phrases indicate that? So extremely violent, no one could pass.
 - c. Where did these guys come from? The tombs. What did that make them to a Jewish person? Unclean. Why did they live there? The city rejected them – this was the only place they could live.
 - d. Where else have we just seen two men? In v.18 – 22. The two men who wanted to follow Jesus but couldn’t.
 - e. How are those two men in v.18 – 22 similar to these two men in Gadara? They are listening to multiple voices – no single Lord.
 - f. KEY QUESTION: What are the other voices we listen to? How are we like the demoniacs torn apart by voices and like the two early disciples who wanted to heed other authorities?
 - i. C.S. Lewis had this thought when he was on the verge of accepting Jesus Christ. “All my acts, desires, and thoughts were to be brought into harmony with [God]. For the first time, I examined myself with a seriously practical purpose. And there I found what appalled me; a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds. My name was legion.” (Surprised by Joy).
 - ii. Peter Sellers was the famous British radio personality and actor who played Inspector Clouseau in the Pink Panther movies. Having played so many roles throughout his working life, he reached an identity crisis in his final days as he lay suffering with a terminal illness. During an interview, he was asked what his thoughts were about the many roles and many radio voices he had played during his storied career. His answer is haunting. He quietly said: “I only wish I knew which voice was my own.” He didn’t know who he was. He was legion.
 - iii. Notice that Jesus had to wrestle with his identity first, in the baptism and temptation story (Mt.3:13 – 4:11). Jesus now refines the disciples’ identity, our identity, first, as he presses into his mission.
 - g. Notice that Jesus kicks out the other voices, very quickly. And those voices are revealed for what they are. What are pigs to a Jewish person? Unclean. Spirits that were unclean go into flesh that was unclean. What was hidden on the inside is revealed outwardly.
 - i. Why does the crowd in Gadara want Jesus to leave? They are afraid of him, they value pigs more than people, etc.
 - ii. How does Jesus reveal what is inside people in this section? He revealed faith in the centurion and the leper. He revealed indecision among some people. He revealed doubt in his disciples on the stormy sea. What does Jesus reveal about the crowd in Gadara in v.34?
 - iii. This means that Jesus can heal what is inside us. He can make us clean. But it’s fundamentally an issue of how listening to other voices. Notice how that motif continues. The pigs died in the sea. What was supposed to die in the sea from within the disciples? Unbelief. Doubt of Jesus’ goodness. Doubt of Jesus’ power. Resistance to the mission to reach the Gentiles.
 - iv. These demoniacs can stop living in the tombs now. They can go from death to life, just as the disciples have gone from death to life because of Jesus.
 - h. How do we respond to Jesus after reading this passage?

For reference:

This statement is often considered a 'hard saying' of Jesus (Bruce 1983:161 – 163). Some critical scholars suggest that Jesus was encouraging His disciples to break the fifth commandment (honor your father and mother) by not giving their fathers a proper burial (Sanders 1985:252 – 255). Is He really demanding this? Most commentaries suggest Jesus meant, 'Leave the (spiritual) dead to bury the (physical) dead' (Fitzmyer 1981: 836; Liefeld 1984: 935). This interpretation, though common (Fitzmyer calls it the 'majority interpretation'), is not consistent with the text and with Jewish burial practices of the first century AD.

Problems with the Majority Interpretation

Byron McCane, of Duke University, points out three problems with the 'majority interpretation' (hereafter MI; 1990:38 – 39). First, it does not give an adequate explanation of the disciples' request, 'Let me first go and bury my father.' The MI sees the request as a conflict of loyalties between the disciples' responsibilities to their dead fathers and their commitment to follow Jesus. This minimizes the importance of the adverb 'first.' In each case, a disciple was requesting time to fulfill his family obligation regarding the burial of his father. Once this was discharged, the disciple would return and follow Jesus. Thus the MI does not explain the disciples' request for time.

Secondly, those who follow the MI generally omit the words 'their own dead,' because they want to distinguish between two meanings of the word 'dead.' 'Let the spiritually dead bury the physically dead.' However, the text says, 'their own dead,' indicating that both occurrences of 'dead' are connected in a reflexive possessive relation. There is no need to spiritualize the text regarding the dead; both are physically dead!

Finally, the MI goes against first-century Jewish burial customs. In the first century, when a person died, they normally were taken and buried immediately in the family burial cave that had been hewn out of bedrock. [For the archaeology of Jewish tombs during the New Testament period, see Rahmani 1958, 1961, 1982a]. This custom is based on the injunction found in the Mosaic Law, not to leave the corpse on an executed person on the tree overnight (Dt.21:22 – 23). Two examples of immediate burials are found in the New Testament: Jesus (John 19:31) and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:6 – 10).

Immediately after the burial, the family would separate itself and mourn for seven days. This mourning period was called *shiv'ah*. It would have been impossible for the disciples to make their request if their father had just died. If they were the eldest sons, they were obligated by custom to immediately bury their fathers. If the MI is correct, the disciples would have been acting contrary to normal first-century Jewish burial practices.

McCane suggests an interpretation that is consistent with first-century Jewish burial practices (1990:40 – 41). After a body was placed in a burial cave, it was left to decompose. The family mourned for seven days. This initial mourning period was followed by a less intense 30-day period of mourning, called *shloshim*. However, the entire mourning period was not fully over until the flesh of the deceased had decomposed, usually about a year later. The Jerusalem Talmud states: When the flesh had wasted away, the bones were collected and placed in chests (ossuaries). On that day (the son) mourned, but the following day he was glad, because his forebears rested from judgment (Moed Qatan 1:5).

The final act of mourning, the gathering of the bones into a bone box called an ossuary, was called *ossilegium*, or secondary burial. It is this act, I believe, that is in view in our Lord's response. [For a good discussion of secondary burials, see Meyers 1971; Rahmani 1981. On ossuaries, see Rahmani 1982b]. The disciples' request and Jesus' response makes good sense in light of the Jewish custom of secondary burial. When the disciples requested time to bury their fathers they were actually asking for time to finish the rite of secondary burial. Their father had died, been placed in the family burial cave, and the sons had sat *shiv'ah* and most likely *shloshim*. They had requested anywhere from a few weeks to up to 11 months to finish the ritual of *ossilegium* before they returned to Jesus. Jesus' sharp answer fits well with secondary burial. The fathers had been buried in the family burial caves and their bodies were slowly decomposing. In the tombs, along with the fathers, were other family members who had died, some awaiting secondary burial, others already placed in ossuaries. When Jesus stated, 'Let the dead bury their own dead,' he was referring to two different kinds of dead in the tomb: the bones of the deceased which had already been neatly placed in ossuaries and the fathers who had yet to be reburied. The phrase 'own dead' indicates that the fathers were included among the dead.