I. Introduction to Galilean Ministry—Part 2

In our last lesson we surveyed the initial phase or period of Jesus’ popularity, what some call His great Galilean ministry. We want to turn to the second half of that Galilean ministry in this lesson, and we continue by following the basic outline of Mark’s gospel, who is not always writing in strict chronological fashion as compared to the parallels in Matthew and Luke. It introduces us to all of the major topics and literary forms that are used by the gospel writers to summarize this phase of Jesus’ life.

II. Nature Miracles

We have seen that in Mark 1 he introduces us to a sample of Jesus’ miracles. At the end of Mark 4, beginning in verse 35 and carrying on well into chapter 6, we have another cluster of miracles from Jesus’ Galilean ministry: this time, in many instances, what scholars have often called His nature miracles—those which demonstrate, in as dramatic fashion as any, the remarkable supernatural power that Jesus, as fully human but also fully God, could draw on, on those occasions when it was His Father’s will.

A. Calming the Storm

Mark 4:35–41 describes the famous miracle of Jesus stilling the storm on the Sea of Galilee; and it is important to read this passage carefully, because countless generations of preachers have tried to apply it by focusing not on the supernatural element but on the ways in which Jesus “stills the storms in our lives.” Unfortunately, as many of us are perhaps well aware, God does at times leave us in the midst of other kinds of storms, and this miracle is not primarily one to promise us automatic relief from all of our difficulties. Instead, if we read carefully the way the gospel writers
narrate it, we learn that it led the disciples to ask, “Who is this, that even wind and waves obey Him?” In short, for the gospel writers this miracle, like the others that we will see in this section of Jesus’ ministry, was designed to raise the question of who Jesus was, to point people to belief in Jesus as the Christ, as the God-man. That may or may not involve Him stilling the storms of our lives, but it clearly alludes back to Job and the Psalms, in which God treads on the wind and waves and shows mastery over the sea and the cosmic forces.

B. Power over the Demonic

This theme continues in Mark 5 and parallels as another very dramatic exorcism occurs—Jesus exorcising the Gerasene demoniac. He sends the demons out of the afflicted man into the pigs, who then throw themselves off the cliff to their destruction in the Sea of Galilee. One has to put oneself into a Jewish mind-set here and recall the comedy, even; this would have been heard with a first-century Jewish audience. Pigs were the most unclean of animals and were not to have been raised for their meat as presumably these pig farmers were. This is not a miracle of the destruction of human life, but merely of animal life; and tragic as the loss may have been for the pig farmers, it is fully in keeping with what the first-century Jew would have understood would have fit in with God’s design. The important part of this story, again however, is not what we sometimes make of it in our concern for animal rights or the like, but rather how it points out who Jesus is and the supernatural power that He has: the townspeople’s reaction, falling before Jesus, as Peter in fact had done at an earlier miracle beside the Sea of Galilee narrated in Luke 5:1-11, saying, “Depart from us”—recognizing their unworthiness to be in the presence of one who is both so powerful and so holy.

C. Power over Disease and Death

Jesus demonstrates, therefore, His power over disaster, His power over the demonic, and, as we move to the latter part of Mark 5 beginning with verse 21, we learn of His power over disease and over death: the twin stories, narrated together because of their chronological relationship to each other, of curing the woman with a flow of blood, a hemorrhage as we would call it today, and of raising Jairus’ daughter. The
interesting element here, as well as the fact that here is the first of several miracles that demonstrate Jesus’ ability actually to bring life out of death, to bring humans back from the dead, is the two-fold statement that faith was part of the process that led to the healing of these two individuals and their loved ones. It is interesting to study what the gospel writers had to teach about the relationship of faith and miracles, particularly in light of widespread diversity and even confusion in teaching among God’s people today on this very topic.

If one looks at the four passages in the gospel of Mark, including the one that comes in Mark 6:6 speaking of how Jesus could do few miracles in Nazareth because of their lack of faith, one can very clearly see models or illustrations in which faith is an important prerequisite for God to work a miracle. The healing of the hemorrhaging woman, the raising of Jairus’ daughter, and the failure of Nazareth all illustrate, as do other passages, that God chooses to work through the power of human faith to produce miracles. Undoubtedly, one reason that we do not always see more miracles is because we do not always have sufficient faith. But that principle cannot be made the only or even the primary teaching of the Gospels about the relationship of faith and miracles. In the case of the stilling of the storm, we read rather that miracles came where there was little or no faith at all precisely for the purpose to try to instill faith. If we recall the miracles that we surveyed in our last lesson, of turning water into wine in John 2 and of healing the nobleman’s son in John 4, John again gives explicit statements that these miracles were meant to bring about belief on the part of those who saw them—in one case the disciples, in the other case complete outsiders to Jesus’ ministry. God can work miracles where there is no faith at all, and we dare not assume one uniform relationship between faith and God’s ability to work miracles.

D. Feeding the Five Thousand

Returning to Mark’s skeletal outline and proceeding with his series of nature miracles, we come in Mark 6 to the feeding of the five thousand. Here yet another motive comes into play that is a key motive in several of Jesus’ miracles throughout the Gospels and that is simple compassion for human need. Here nothing is said of Jesus attempting to instill faith or to respond to faith, but rather he sees these crowds who
are hungry. But also Mark’s gospel tells us they are like sheep without a shepherd; that is, the religious leaders who should have properly shepherded the flock of the people of Israel have not been doing their jobs properly. And so, once again, irrespective of whatever this story teaches about faith or about God’s compassion or His ability to take care of human need, the primary focus is again christological—that is, raising the question of the identity of Jesus. John brings this out very clearly in his account; this, in fact, is the only miracle of Jesus that appears in all four Gospels and therefore it must be an extremely crucial one.

John alone describes after this feeding of the five thousand when Jesus has crossed back over the lake and is preaching in the synagogue in Capernaum His sermon or discourse in which He calls Himself the bread of life. Just as He has provided for people’s physical needs out in the wilderness, He will be the spiritual sustenance for those who believe in Him. Even in the versions in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, however, these christological overtones are not absent, and they explain some of the otherwise incidental and somewhat curious details of the narrative. Not only does Jesus implicitly contrast Himself with the shepherds who are not doing their jobs (Mark 6:34 alluding to similar prophecy in the days of Ezekiel 34:5 where the shepherd is the one who is to redeem Israel), but also the fact that bread for the wilderness conjures up memories in any faithful Jew’s mind of the miracle of Moses providing manna in the wilderness and those prophecies that the Messianic prophet would be one like unto Moses, coming out of Deuteronomy 18:15-18. The fact that there were basketfuls in abundance, and in the case of the feeding of the five thousand, twelve baskets, again alludes back to the story of the wilderness wanderings, the twelve tribes of Israel, and manna as well as quail—more than anyone could possibly eat, particularly when people complained about their lack of provisions.

E. Walking on the Water

This christological focus then carries through to the final nature miracle of this phase of Mark’s gospel—the final verses or close to the end of Mark 6:45-52 and parallel in which Jesus walks on the water. But again, this is not just some convenient way to get across the lake fast when the boat had already been taken by the disciples. Rather, it is a
self-revelation of Jesus’ deity to His followers: the words, “Fear not! It is I” (the latter part of that expression could also be more literally translated, “Fear not! I am”—the very words that form, in the Greek translation of Exodus 3:14, the divine name for Yahweh Himself, “I am who I am”); and the language in Mark 6:48 that Jesus meant to pass by the disciples probably does not mean He was hoping they would not see Him, but uses the identical verb that appears in the account of Moses seeing God pass by him on Mount Sinai in Exodus 33. In other words, God is revealing Himself: what scholars call a theophany, a revelation of God in the person of Jesus.

F. Purpose of Miracles

If we would summarize then, what we have learned about the purpose of Jesus’ miracles, particularly these more dramatic miracles over nature, we may speak of an evidential purpose meant to point out who Jesus is and provide evidence for that, an evangelistic purpose meant to further call people to explicit faith and discipleship in Jesus; an empathetic purpose—simple compassion for human need; and perhaps most significantly of all, though perhaps also least understood or noted, an eschatological purpose. As put most clearly in Jesus’ debate back again in the context of His exorcisms with the Jewish leaders—that if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, or as one parallel puts it, by “the finger of God,” then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” Perhaps more than any other single purpose for Jesus’ miracles is to demonstrate that the kingdom of God is now breaking into human history in a new and decisive and climactic phase. We must be careful beyond that, however, of assuming any consistency of patterns as to when God will or will not work miracles, lest we compromise His sovereignty in the process. With the conclusion of our survey of Jesus’ nature miracles we reach again a turning point in the narratives of the Synoptic Gospels.

III. Withdrawal from Galilee

A. Beginning of the End

Jesus’ phase of popularity is bringing great crowds, crowds so much that He has to flee from one territory to another.
to escape them, and still scarcely succeeds. As a result, but also because, of the question of His identity, the newness of His ministry over against the Jewish leaders is increasingly coming into focus. Jesus prepares for a phase of his ministry which students of the life of Christ have often described as His withdrawal from Galilee. Still following Mark’s outline, as we turn to the beginning of Mark 7 we read a story which still takes place in Galilee, yet another conflict with the Jewish leaders, but which prepares the way for the withdrawal. We might speak of it as Jesus’ theological or ideological withdrawal from Galilee; it brings His disputes with the Jewish leaders and their ancestral traditions, particularly the oral laws of the Pharisees, into the sharpest focus thus far. It is a debate that takes place over their purity laws, on what does or does not defile a person, and comes in the context of their coming to Jesus’ disciples complaining that Jesus does not follow the ceremonial washing of hands prior to eating. They are not accusing Jesus of breaking any law that comes out of the Old Testament—there is no evidence that Jesus during His earthly life ever does this or encourages anyone else to—but He clearly is coming into conflict with their oral traditions. The issue of purity leads Jesus to raise a second question in His response and that is to point out how even the Pharisees often set aside even the written laws of the Old Testament for some of their traditions that they have built on elaborating the Hebrew Scriptures.

He alludes to a practice known as corban, the Hebrew word that refers to a gift devoted to God exclusively for the use of the temple, often a financial gift. But the paradox of the Jewish oral tradition was that while the giver of this gift was still alive he could draw on its money and its earnings for his own liking, but it could not be used to help anybody else, even in the case Jesus discusses—aged family members who are perhaps in acute need. These inconsistencies then lead Jesus to challenge more generally the oral laws of the Jews than just the issue of purity with which the debate began. By the time we reach the end of the story, particularly in Mark’s account in Mark 7:19, Jesus has just told a short parable about how it is not what goes into a person such as food that defiles them but what comes out from them. Mark, as the narrator of the story, then adds the parenthetical comment, “by this, Jesus declared all food clean.” This may well not have been a realization that came to any of the disciples’ minds as Jesus was alive and they heard this, for Acts 10
will have to describe a supernatural vision from heaven repeated three times before the apostle Peter comes to the conclusion that there are no unclean foods in the age of the new covenant that Jesus has inaugurated. It may be Mark’s reflection on Peter’s incident, as his secretary or collector of his memoirs, that enables Mark to make this parenthetical comment here, but it clearly shows that the Christian church by the time of the writing of the Gospel had come to the conclusion that Jesus was much more than just a faithful Jew. The revelation that He was bringing from God would, in certain ways, actually supersede or fulfill God’s laws in ways that would mean that Christ’s followers would not follow those laws or apply them literally in the ways that Jews previously had.

B. Syrophoenicia

With this theological foundation for Jesus’ withdrawal from Israel, one can then trace the rest of Mark 7 and well into chapter 8 in which Jesus actually geographically leaves the territory of Israel—Galilee, Samaria, and Judea that formed the heart of the Jewish nation in the first century. Mark 7:24-30 finds Him to the northwest, in the territory of Syrophoenicia, exorcising the daughter of a woman there; and although we have alluded in a previous lesson to Jesus’ cryptic words that seemingly rebuke this woman for being a Gentile, at the outset He eventually does grant her request and praises her great faith. Perhaps He had been testing her all along. At any rate, where the story ends is that a Gentile and her daughter are the recipients of Jesus’ blessing, of His miracle-working ministry, every bit as much as many of the Jews had previously been.

C. Decapolis Area

Mark 7:31-37 and parallels proceeds to the east of Galilee to the region of the Decapolis, where Jesus heals a deaf mute (again, we may reasonably infer, a Gentile); and here the term that is used to describe this man’s disability is a term that appears elsewhere in the Greek Scriptures only in Isaiah 35:6—again a model of the eschatological blessings prophesied in Isaiah coming to Gentiles as well as Jews. The feeding of the four thousand with which Mark 8 begins, repeats down to very minute details the same miracles of the
five thousand but again in Gentile territory, suggesting that God, through Jesus, is the God of both kinds of people. Here the leftover baskets are seven-fold, the universal number of Scripture to refer to all humanity rather than the twelve tribes of Israel. Mark then proceeds to the healing of the blind man in Bethsaida, just barely across the eastern shores of the Sea of Galilee from the Jordan River but again in largely Gentile territory.

D. Caesarea Philippi

As we reach the close of Mark 8, we come to the climax of this large year-long phase of Jesus’ great Galilean ministry and the transition point that will set the stage for the final year or phase of His ministry that will see Him moving inexorably toward the cross.

Again we are outside of Israelite territory, on the road to Caesarea Philippi north of Galilee, when Jesus initiates the discussion with His disciples that will eventually illicit Simon Peter’s famous confession of faith, “You are the Christ,” or as Matthew’s fuller version of that passage goes on to say, “the Son of the living God.” Matthew alone finds Jesus praising Peter’s confession, not as something that was humanly given but divinely given, and promising that “on this rock (the Greek word petra), a play on the Greek name of Peter—Petra), I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” There is this passage also in Matthew 16:19, in particular in which Jesus gives Peter the keys to the kingdom.

Much theological controversy over the centuries of church history has surrounded these passages. In some circles Peter has been elevated as virtually the first pope, treated as if he were infallible—the doctrine of apostolic succession of followers of Peter with the same privileges having been derived from this text. As an overreaction against those excesses there are those who have said Peter is not the rock at all—it is merely the confession of his mouth (though this may be over-subtle in terms of the original languages; in Aramaic, the identical word kepha would have been used to refer both to Peter’s name and to the word for rock or stone.) More likely, what Peter is being promised here is that he will be a foundational church leader, though nothing is said about any of his successors or any infallibility. Rather, what we
see him performing throughout the book of Acts is as a key leader of early church history, often going to the site of a new place, a new development in the spread of the Gospel. One thinks particularly of the story of Acts 8 with the conversion of the Samaritans, which may reflect the privileges that are given to Peter in this context. That the Gospels are not trying to gloss over or overly exalt Peter is very clear from what immediately follows in all three of the Synoptic Gospels. Whatever divine insight Peter had in this moment of illumination quickly takes a back seat to his unpreparedness for Jesus’ next remarks. For the first of three times in rapid succession Jesus will predict His upcoming death, all of the events that lead up to it—the suffering, the ignominy—and then ultimately His resurrection. Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes Him for such a prophecy, making it clear that even this far into His ministry he is not prepared for a dying, even a crucified, Messiah.

E. The Way to the Cross

The remaining teachings that round out this section of Jesus’ withdrawal, and even His return to Galilee before His actual departure for Jerusalem, take up the theme of suffering. The end of Mark 8 and all of Mark 9 (and their parallels) deal with how the disciples too must take up their cross and follow Jesus. There is one momentary exception to this pattern of teaching about discipleship on the road to the cross, and it is the miracle of the transfiguration in the first part of Mark 9—reminding the disciples, as it were, that there is glory on the other side of the cross. The transfiguration foreshadows Jesus’ resurrection and ultimately His ascension and heavenly exaltation. Disciples too can look forward to ultimate perfection and glory with Jesus, but unfortunately the circumstances of this life, whether through overt persecution for being a follower of Jesus or whether through the ordinary trials of sickness caused by life in a fallen world, remind us that the natural form of the Christian life is often one of suffering. Our glory, our complete triumph, often is deferred until the other side of our deaths and resurrection as well.