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God's Perspective on Life's Difficulties

Mark 4:35-41

Pastor Andy MacFarlane

In his book Leadership that Works, Leith Anderson shares an interesting story. June 6, 1994, was the 50th anniversary of the allied invasion of Normandy, which began the epic battle to liberate Europe from Nazi control. The loss of life that first day is almost beyond comprehension. As it was such a monumental day in the start of a monumental battle, fifty years later all of the networks ran anniversary specials and this particular one contrasted two interviews, back to back. The first was with a soldier who landed in Omaha beach; he was in with the first leg. He said as he looked around and saw all the human carnage and casualties he determined, "We are going to lose this battle."

The very next interview was with a U.S. Army Air Corps reconnaissance pilot. He saw the very same casualties down on the beach that the first soldier described. But then he also saw the success of the marines and the penetration of the paratroopers and the effectiveness in the aerial bombers, and he concluded, "We're gonna win."

Same battle, yet two very different conclusions about the eventual outcome of the battle. Why? Why this distinct difference? Well, I think it has to do with perspective. The soldier on the beach had a very limited perspective. All he could see was what was around him. The pilot had a much fuller, a much wider perspective.

As we journey through life, we're in a battle. Life just has a way of throwing difficulties, hardships, and obstacles in our path. Often as these mount, we, like the soldier on the beach with our limited perspective, can conclude, *we are losing. Life is out of control. We're victims of bad luck. Circumstances are just against us!* God, on the other hand, has a much fuller perspective, like the pilot. He sees much more than we do. I would suggest we need God's perspective.

That soldier on Omaha beach I think would have been very heartened to get the perspective of the pilot. It would have given him motivation to continue on. In the same way, God's perspective will give us motivation to continue on in the face of life's difficulties. Now, getting God's perspective won't make our problems go away, but it will remind us there is a greater purpose for them.

So I want to take us off the beach and get us up in the airplane by answering the question: What is God's perspective on life's difficulties? I invite you to turn to Mark 4, verses 35-41. We'll look at this passage and try to answer the question: what is God's perspective on life's difficulties?

Our passage opens with Jesus calling the disciples to go to the other side. And as we look at verse 36, we have every reason to believe this will be a routine trip. We know that several of the disciples are fishermen by trade, and we would think they would be able to handle most disturbances at sea. However, by verse 37, any idea of a routine, uneventful trip is gone, because we read of a fierce gale of wind, and waves that were breaking over the boat, so much so that the boat was already beginning to fill.

In verse 38, we see that Jesus is asleep, and the disciples seem to be clearly panicked, because they ask him,

Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing? (*NASB)

In verse 39, Jesus gets up, and with three words, “**Hush, be still,**” he rebukes the storm. And then in verse 40, he asks the disciples a couple of questions.

Why are you afraid? How is it that you have no faith?

I’m intrigued by Jesus’ questioning of the disciples faith because, honestly, at first pass, I thought the disciples did pretty well. They got in a crisis and they turned to Jesus. But far from being impressed with their faith, Jesus is concerned with their faith. Why? Though they turned to Jesus, they doubted His care for them. Look at four of the first five words of their question, “**Teacher, do You not care?**”

You know, as I think of the disciples’ response, it’s really not that different from how I respond in a difficulty or a hard time. I’m fully convinced that Jesus can handle any circumstance in my life, and I’m quick to turn to him. But when it doesn’t get resolved like I think it ought to, I ask the question, “Do you not care? How could a loving God, an all-powerful God let this happen to me? And the more my difficulties and trials go on, the more fervently and frequently I ask the question, “Do you not care?”

As I step back from this passage for a minute and think, one of the first questions I ask is why didn’t Jesus just calm the storm 15, 20, 30 minutes earlier than He did. He is all knowing, He is all powerful; why not speak the three words, “Hush, be still,” 30 minutes earlier and save the disciples all the stress? The question in play seems to be Jesus’ care. That’s what they asked in verse 38, “**Do You not care?**” So, if Jesus cares so much, why not still the storm 20 to 30 minutes earlier?

We don’t know. The text doesn’t answer that, and we don’t know the mind of God. But if we draw on our human experience, I don’t think it’s that difficult to speculate on why Jesus might have chosen not to calm the storm earlier than He did.

We can draw on a math lesson here from my fourth grade class. Part of Mrs. Psihas’ fourth grade math lesson was that we had to learn our multiplication tables. So everyday as part of our math lesson, we would have to write out a given number. On a given day we were working on the “fours,” so we’d have to write: $4 \times 1 = 4$; $4 \times 1 = 4$... and we’d do that ten times. Then we’d come back and write: $4 \times 2 = 8$; $4 \times 2 = 8$... ten times. And we’d work all the way down to 4×9 ... all the way across.

The hope and the goal was that in writing these things out we would commit them to memory. Now, I must tell you, as fourth graders, we loathed this exercise. We saw no point in it, and we wanted to get it done as quickly as possible.

Well, one day one of our brighter students said, “You know, it would be faster, instead of writing $4 \times 1 = 4$, $4 \times 1 = 4$... if we just did it in columns!” So we all got the idea, and we wrote: 4, 4, 4, 4, 4... then x, x, x, x... 1, 1, 1, 1, 1... =, =, =, =, =... in a column.

Now whether it was faster or not, I don't know, but we determined it was, so we all got involved in doing it. Well, every ten to fifteen minutes, Mrs. Siehaus would get up and she'd walk around. I mean the first time she saw this, she said, "Stop! Everybody stop! Put down your pencils and listen to me! You cannot write in columns. You must write in rows!"

Well, apparently there was a student two seats over from me that didn't get it, because after that warning, she continued to write in columns. Mrs. Siehaus picked up her paper, tore it horizontally, tore it vertically, threw it in the trash, and had her start again. We got the message.

My question is: *Why didn't she just let us complete the assignment? What did she care? Just let us get it done!* Mrs. Siehaus could see our academic future, and she knew in the 5th and 6th and 7th grades and beyond, we had to have $4 \times 3 = 12$ at our fingertips, and we had to have $4 \times 7 = 28$ at our fingertips. And writing in columns, 4, 4, 4, 4, 4... x, x, x, x, x... 1, 1, 1, 1, 1... wasn't going to accomplish that.

You see, she cared too much just to let us finish our assignment without getting what we needed to get - understanding. She cared too much just to let us be done with it. She wouldn't let us be done with it until we got what we needed for the future.

I'd say in the same way, God cares too much. He knows our future. He sees what we need, and He cares too much just to let us be done with difficulties or trials or just to wipe them out of our lives. There's something we need to get. And that sounds good as we're sitting here in church, but it's a little harder to swallow when we face a financial difficulty, and month after month we stretch and struggle just to make ends meet. And we know God owns the cattle on a thousand hills and could provide the resources in a minute to solve our issues. But as time goes on and we face the same frustration, we may be tempted to ask the question in verse 38, "Do You not care?"

Or maybe it's a health issue. You or a loved one has been afflicted with a certain condition, and you know God could speak the word and it'd be done. But as the days and the weeks and the months go by and you're praying and praying, all you are seeing is a decline in health. Maybe, like me, you're tempted to ask the question, "Do You not care?"

Maybe it's a broken relationship with a family member or friend that just can't seem to be resolved. Or maybe you're in here this morning as a single adult, and you look out on the horizon and you say, "Man, there are not a whole lot of possibilities out there." And it's compounded as you get one friend's wedding invitation and an invitation to another friend's shower, and you go to still another other friend's wedding. And you're happy for your friends, but in the midst of that, you wonder, *God, what about me? Do You not care?*

Or, maybe for you the issue is fertility. You and your spouse would love to have a child. But month after month after month the answer seems to be no. And then here comes the birth announcement of a friend and the invitation to the baby shower of another friend and the end-of-the-year Christmas pictures with all the newborns. And you're happy for your friends, but as you see that, you wonder, *Do You not care about us? About me?*

I want to tell you, I think God does care, and there is something He really wants us to understand. Verse 41 gives us some insight there. It says this:

They [the disciples] became very much afraid and said to one another, “Who then is this that even the wind and the sea obey Him?” (v. 41)

My friends, the disciples are wrestling with the very person of Jesus. Who is this that He can speak three words and the storm is done? Their concept, their understanding of Jesus is being expanded...no, it's not being expanded—it's being exploded! They're coming to understand Jesus like they haven't understood him before. I find that interesting, because if we assume Mark is chronological, to this point they have seen Jesus heal a paralytic, and they have seen Jesus heal other sick people, and they have seen Jesus cast out the demons from people, and they have certainly heard Jesus teach. What is it about this work of Jesus that so impacts their life, that so causes them to wrestle with, *Who is this?* It's their crisis, their difficulty, and they're wrestling with 'Who is this Jesus?' like they'd never wrestled with it before.

Remember we asked a question to start our look at this text. We asked, “What is God's perspective on life's difficulties?” Based on what we are seeing here, I think we can say God uses life's difficulties to reveal Himself to us.

Please hear me. I believe biblical knowledge and correct theology are absolutely necessary starting points on our journey to get to know God. But if you say, “Yeah, I really want to get to know God,” then I must tell you, I think God's curriculum for us is going to include hard times. It's going to include storms. It's going to include difficulties. Because you see, there is some understanding, there's some insight, there's some knowledge of God we just can't get in a sermon, and we can't get it in a Bible study, and we can't get it hearing someone else's testimony. We can't even get it studying the Greek or the Hebrew. There is some understanding, some knowledge of God that only comes with wrestling through and, yes, agonizing through, life's difficulties.

God uses life's difficulties to reveal himself to us. One life that exemplifies that truth is the life of Joni Eareckson Tada. Many of you know her story, but for those of you who don't, here it is. At 17 years of age, she was paralyzed from the neck down in a diving accident. For the last three decades, every day of every week of every month, she has counted on somebody to give her a bath, to sit her up in her chair, to get her dressed, to brush her hair, and to brush her teeth. In her book Holiness in Hidden Places, she describes the arduous task of trying to pass through the drive-thru. Day after day, week after week she confronts this frustration of not even being able to do the simplest of tasks. Is there any point to it? Is there any purpose? Or is Joni Eareckson Tada just living out her bad luck? Is she just stuck with her misfortune?

Dr. J. I. Packer is one of the most renowned authors and theologians of our time. In his book Rediscovering Holiness, he writes this:

Twice it has been my privilege to introduce Joni Eareckson. Each time, I ventured to predict that her message would show her to be the healthiest person in the building—a prediction which, so far as I can judge, came true both times.

Interesting. He perceived her to be the spiritually healthiest person—even spiritually healthier than a great theologian like himself. What is the explanation? What is the source of Joni Eareckson Tada's great spiritual health? I would suggest it is her medical condition. Somewhere in the frustration of crying out, “God, how long? God, why?” day after day, week after week, and month after month, Joni Eareckson Tada received knowledge, insight, and comprehension of God that most of us flat do not have. God uses life's difficulties to reveal

Himself to us. So, what do we do with this storm at sea from two thousand years ago? Well, the Holy Spirit may lead you to apply this in a number of ways in your life. But let me suggest three for your consideration.

First, with God working in your inner being, in your inner heart, would you change your perspective on life's difficulties? My thinking is this. Most of us look at life's difficulties and think we want to avoid them at all costs. When we get stuck in one, we just gotta endure it. Now, I'm not suggesting that we go out and look for problems—they'll come our way. But when they do, would you understand that they are motivated by God's care for you? When I mention the word *difficulty* or *trial*, most of you can click off a couple or three—"Andy, I got this...I got that...I got that." As you think about those difficult situations, those hard circumstances, would you understand that those are a way in which God can reveal Himself to you that He can't do through a sermon or a Bible study or listening to someone else's testimony?

There are a few of you who don't have any hard circumstances or difficulties. To you, I want to say, "Be of good cheer! One is on the way." Isn't that encouraging? But my thinking is this. Let's get ready now before it hits. I'm not looking for it, I'm not going to embrace it, but when it comes, I'm going to understand it comes from the hand of a caring God and is a unique opportunity to get to know God. Let's begin to view life's difficulties differently.

Second, I would suggest if we are going to maximize the opportunity that difficulties give us to get to know God, we need to change the focus of our questions. We need to change the questions that we ask.

Look at verse 38 again. Here is the first question that the disciples ask: "**Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?**" The focus of that question is *Jesus, what are You going to do for us? We're in a world of hurt! Get up! Get up! Get up and save us!*

Folks, when I get in a hard time, I've got a lot of questions for *God. What are You going to do for me? How long is this going to last? God, I serve You as a missionary; I serve you as a pastor, and this is what I get? Why do I get stuck with this?* The focus of my questions (and probably your questions) is *God, what are you going to do for me?* Notice, by verse 41 the disciples are asking a very different question with a very different focus.

Who then is this that even the wind and the sea obey Him? (v. 41)

Let's change the focus of our question when we get in hard times: *God, what do You want me to learn about You?* Maybe use this question: *God, who are You? Show me who You are in the midst of this difficulty.* In order to maximize the opportunity difficulties give us, let's change our questions; let's change the focus of our questions.

Third and finally, maybe you've been wrestling with a hard time, and it just doesn't seem to go away. For whatever reason, it has gotten a hold of you. And in your heart of hearts, you pose the question in verse 38: *Do you not care?* I must tell you, Jesus answers like He does in verse 40,

How is it that you have no faith? (v. 40)

What I'd like to do this morning is offer you (and offer us because I'm in the same boat) the opportunity to go from *no faith* to *faith* by just offering up a simple prayer.

God, I don't understand. I can't see Your goodness in this. But Father, help me believe, and help me in my unbelief—help me believe that You can use this situation to reveal Yourself to me.

The exact words are not important, but the attitude of our hearts *is* important. Would you ask God to work so that you could believe even in the midst of a difficulty that God cares for you?

Like most parents, I am smitten with my kids. I just love them, and I dream about their future, what they might become. And I love being involved in their development. At 15 months old, our oldest son began to play with a shape sorter. It's a little toy that helps a child develop coordination. There are plastic pieces, and they have to fit into their respective openings—a circle, a triangle, a square, and a pentagon. The idea is that coordination develops as children manipulate these pieces.

When my son began to play with it, he was only interested in using the circle piece. With the triangle, square, and pentagon, you have to line up the corners, and that was frustrating for him. So his way of playing was he would put the circle pieces in; then he would throw it down so it would open. He'd grab the circle pieces, close it, and put the circle pieces in and throw it down, and that's how it would go. He was just happy playing that way.

Well, as I observed his play, I got down on the floor with him. And after he put the circle pieces in, with my left hand I held the shape sorter shut. And with my right hand I took his little hand and together we'd put the triangle and the square and the pentagon in. I must tell you, he did not appreciate my involvement in his play, and he was very vociferous in letting me know he didn't want me there. And if he could have spoken, I think he would have asked questions like this, "Why? Why are you doing this? Do you not care that I was playing contentedly?"

You know, if he had asked such questions, I would have said, "Oh son, son, more than you know and more than you can understand, I care. I'm doing this because I'm thinking of the coordination you'll develop that will enable you to manipulate play-doh, and I'm thinking of the coordination that you will develop that will make you more adept at handwriting and more skilled at playing ball. Son, I'm thinking about your future. I know you don't understand, but I really do care."

Do you know as much as I care about my sons, God cares infinitely more about you? Do you know as committed as I am to their development, God is infinitely more committed to your development? Now, my illustration breaks down because I certainly caused my son's frustration. God will never cause life's difficulties, but He will allow them. But here is where my illustration holds up: Just as it was my care that motivated me to hold the shape sorter shut on my son, so it is God's care for you that motivates Him to allow the financial difficulty, the health issue, the relational stress in your life. And just as I held this shape sorter shut that my son's coordination might increase for his future benefit, so God allows the difficulty in your life that you might know Him better. He allows it for a brighter future for you.

So one more time, let me ask and answer our question. What is God's perspective on life's difficulties? God uses life's difficulties to reveal Himself to us.

Let's pray:

Our God in Heaven, we are weak people with a limited perspective. Father, thank you that You are gracious and You're patient with us. But, Father, we need You to work in our inner beings and in the deepest recesses of our hearts because we just want to avoid difficulties, but You can use them to reveal Yourself to us. So, Father, I pray we'd be men and women who would capture the opportunities that You allow in our lives. Father, build in us the conviction that You do care and that You are using life's difficulties to reveal Yourself to us. We pray this now in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

*Scripture quotations are from the NASB (New American Standard) translation.

Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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Study Questions

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Mark 4:35-41

Bible Study

1. Are you surprised that Jesus slept through the storm? Why or why not? If you had been one of the disciples, after Jesus had calmed the storm and everything had settled down, would you have been mad at Jesus for sleeping through the storm? Why or why not? Are you sometimes frustrated at God's seeming inactivity in the midst of your difficulties?
2. In verse 38, the disciples questioned Jesus' care for them and in verse 40 Jesus responded by questioning the disciples' faith. What kinds of circumstances or events cause you to doubt or question God's care for you? When are you most prone to ask the question of verse 38 "Jesus, do you not care that...?"
3. In verse 41 the disciples are truly astounded by Jesus' calming of the storm. Given that they had seen other great works of Jesus and had certainly heard Jesus' teaching, what was it about this work that so impacted them? When in your life have you most had your knowledge and understanding of Jesus expanded? How has God used the trials and difficulties in your life to expand your knowledge and understanding of Him? Why do you think trials are so powerful in helping us understand God?
4. From verse 38 to verse 41, the focus of the disciples' question changed from them to God. What are the specific difficulties that you are facing right now? What are the benefits of focusing on God instead of on yourself in the midst of these difficulties? What can you do to help ensure that your focus is on God and not yourself? What can others in the group do to help you maintain a focus on God in the midst of your difficulties?

Application

1. Share with one another and pray for one another that you might see the specific trials and difficulties that you are currently facing as unique opportunities to gain insight into and understanding of God.
2. This week, as you face difficulties, instead of asking the question of verse 38, "God, do you not care that...?", ask the question of verse 41, "Who then is this..?" Focus on God and ask Him to reveal Himself to you in the midst of your difficulty.
3. If you have doubted God's care for you in the midst of difficulties, repent of your lack of faith.