

## “The Child Is Not Dead, But Asleep”

### The Sixteenth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

*Texts: Mark 5:21-43; 1 Kings 4:17-24*

---

Jesus has been preaching, healing, and performing miracles in the area around the Sea of Galilee. Recently, Jesus began to preach in parables to illustrate the nature of the kingdom of God. But these parables also explain why it is that the people of Israel are not grasping the true nature of Jesus’ messianic mission. Jesus has also performed several dramatic miracles which demonstrate that his preaching about the kingdom is true. At the same time, these miracles also begin to lift the veil as to Jesus’ true identity. This man is not merely a prophet or a miracle-worker—he is Israel’s Messiah and the Son of God. Jesus has demonstrated his absolute authority over nature and his absolute authority over Satan and the demonic. Now, Jesus will demonstrate his absolute authority over humanity’s greatest enemy—death itself.

This morning we return to our series on the Gospel of Mark. We are in that section of Mark’s Gospel which recounts the latter phase of Jesus’ Galilean ministry during those weeks and months after Jesus first emerged from the wilderness where he had resisted the temptations of Satan and where he received a solemn benediction from the Father—“this is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased.” We have seen that as Jesus’ ministry unfolds in the area around Capernaum—a small fishing village on the Sea of Galilee—several significant trends have developed. First, Jesus’ miracles have attracted huge crowds who now follow him everywhere he went. In keeping with his messianic mission, Jesus crossed over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee to escape from the crowds and to preach to new audiences. Second, we have also seen that the religious leaders of Israel have become increasingly hostile to Jesus and are now openly opposing him. Members of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin have actually accused Jesus of being demon possessed. The Pharisees were even plotting with the Herodians (their sworn political enemies) to kill Jesus at the first opportune moment. Therefore, from the opening chapters of Mark and the beginning of Jesus’ messianic ministry, it is apparent that Jesus’ mission will eventually take him to the cross. Jesus must lay down his life so that we might be saved from sin’s guilt and freed from its power.

As a form of covenant judgment upon the crowds who seek him out for all the wrong reasons, and as a severe judgment upon the faithless shepherds of Israel who don’t believe that he is that one sent from God, Jesus began to preach using parables. While the parables reveal the truth about the nature of the kingdom of God and describe the course of redemptive-history, these parables must be spiritually discerned. When Jesus preaches in parables, he is, in effect, hiding the truth in plain sight. The crowds who sought out Jesus for all the wrong reasons, are now forced to seek understanding from God to make sense of Jesus’ preaching. At the same time, the Pharisees are completely confounded by Jesus’ words which expose for all to see their unbelief and petty opposition to Jesus. On the one hand, the parables are a blessing to God’s people. Yet, on the other, the parables are also a form of curse upon those who see Jesus as a threat. They are also a curse upon those who believe that Jesus has come to relieve their suffering, but who at the same time completely overlook the fact that Jesus came to deal with the root cause of all human suffering and misery, which is our sin.

This is why Jesus explains the meaning of these parables to his twelve disciples and those who followed him such as Matthew’s tax-collecting friends, who see in Jesus someone who was actually willing to sit with them at table, but who also called them to repent of their sins. As he slowly but steadily reveals himself to his disciples, Jesus performs a series of dramatic miracles—calming the storm on the Sea of

Galilee, casting out a legion of demons—and now he will raise the dead. These miracles serve to demonstrate that Jesus is Lord of creation, that Jesus has authority over the devil and all his works, and that Jesus is Lord even over death itself. It is becoming clear to Jesus’ disciples and followers that Jesus is not merely a prophet or a miracle worker, but that he is the very Son of God, the one promised throughout the pages of the Old Testament. Thus the parables and miracles fit together. To those whom God has granted understanding, the miracles and parables prove that the kingdom of God is at hand. But to all those whom God has not granted understanding, the parables and miracles only serve to further harden their hearts against Jesus. So much so, that Jesus will soon marvel at the extent of unbelief.

**A**s we turn to our text this morning (Mark 5:21-43), we will see that Jesus has authority over our greatest enemy when he raises a young child from the dead. We will also see that Jesus has the authority to heal a woman with a severe hemorrhage and whose illness rendered her ceremonially unclean. In both cases, Jesus returns to these people their very lives.

As we have seen in the earlier chapters of Mark’s gospel, Mark groups Jesus’ parables and miracles together so that his reader/hearer gets the sense that when all is said and done, nothing is impossible for Jesus. This effect of this topical arrangement of words and deeds is that all who hear our Lord’s words are thereby summoned to repent of their sins and place their trust in Jesus. Jesus is the very Son of God who came to save his people from their sins. We he says is true and what he commands must be obeyed. Throughout what follows, we also get the sense that this is yet another eyewitness report—Peter’s account of what happened now coming to us through the preaching of Mark.<sup>1</sup>

The account of the resurrection of Jairus’ daughter is separated into two parts. Sandwiched in between Jairus pleading with Jesus and the actual raising of his daughter, Mark includes the account of Jesus healing a woman who suffered from a serious hemorrhage for some twelve years. When Jesus stopped to heal this woman, it prevented him from getting to Jairus’ daughter before she died. Not only was this the sequence in which these events unfolded, but the healing of this woman who faced an eventual death from her condition, clearly anticipates the raising of this little girl who had actually died from her illness.<sup>2</sup> The incident regarding the woman with a hemorrhage certainly heightens the sense of anticipation regarding what follows—if Jesus can heal a woman who has been sick for many years, then surely he can heal Jairus’ daughter as well.

In verses 21-24, Mark sets the scene for us. Jesus returns from the far side of the Sea of Galilee (perhaps to Capernaum) where a huge crowd has assembled (or perhaps remained there, waiting for him until he returned). This was likely the same place where Jesus had taught the crowds previously, using a boat anchored close to the shore. According to Mark’s account, “*When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet and pleaded earnestly with him, ‘My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live.’ So Jesus went with him. A large crowd followed and pressed around him.*”

Jairus is identified as a synagogue ruler, which probably meant that he was the person responsible for arranging and organizing the weekly Sabbath service, along with maintaining the synagogue meeting

---

<sup>1</sup> Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 182.

<sup>2</sup> Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 189.

house. But “synagogue ruler” was also an honorific title bestowed upon a distinguished member of a particular synagogue.<sup>3</sup> We don’t know which applied to Jairus. Since Jesus had recently been in the synagogue in Capernaum, it is not unreasonable to assume that Jairus was already quite familiar with Jesus and may even have seen him heal previously. It is clear from Mark’s account that Jairus believed that Jesus had the power to heal his sick little girl, which is why he came to Jesus and pleaded with him to come and lay his hands upon his daughter. The laying on of hands was a common ritual associated with healing. Despite his rank and high title in the synagogue, Jairus humbly falls at Jesus’ feet, acknowledging that Jesus’ authority was far greater than his own, begging for Jesus to come to his home and heal his daughter. This little girl was quite ill—literally at death’s door—with some unspecified malady.<sup>4</sup> Jesus listened to Jairus’ plea and then immediately went with him to heal his daughter. But as Jesus went with Jairus, the crowds grew excited and surrounded Jesus, making it difficult for Jesus to move very quickly.

While en route to Jairus’ house something remarkable happened. Jesus encountered someone else in desperate need of help and who also believed that he alone could help them in the midst of very difficult circumstances. According to verses 25-26, “*And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse.*” While Mark doesn’t give us the specifics of her illness, it is likely that this poor woman experienced serious menstrual bleeding, which despite her persistent efforts to get relief, had only gotten worse. Not only was this illness increasingly debilitating to her as she got older, but she had spent all her money seeking a cure, to no avail. According to the Talmud (a commentary on Jewish law and practices), the doctors of that time would have prescribed a number of remedies: wine mixed with alum and garden crocuses, or a drink made of onions boiled in wine. They may even have attempted to suddenly shock her (like we do to stop the hiccups) or perhaps had her carry a bag next to her body containing the ash from an ostrich egg.<sup>5</sup> In any case, all of these so-called “cures” were expensive and provided no relief whatsoever. What is worse, if she was a Jew, such an illness would have placed this woman in a perpetual state of ceremonial uncleanness, so that she would have been shunned by virtually everyone she knew. Anyone who touched her, would have also been considered unclean. Hers was a miserable and serious condition. And Jesus will demonstrate his kind and tender compassion upon her.

Like Jairus, this anonymous woman also sought out Jesus, who was now trying to make his way through this huge crowd so as to get to Jairus’ house. According to Mark, this woman too believed that Jesus had the power to help her, and despite the crush of the crowd, she somehow managed to get close enough to Jesus to reach out to him. As we read in verses 27-28, “*When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, ‘If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.’*” The healing was instantaneous. “*Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.*” In one instant, twelve years of pain, suffering, and humiliation were blessedly over. The woman’s hemorrhage immediately stopped.

Jesus was aware that something dramatic had happened, which raises a number of interesting questions

---

<sup>3</sup> Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 183.

<sup>4</sup> Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 183.

<sup>5</sup> Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 192.

related to his divinity and humanity. *“At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him.”* Jesus was aware that God’s power was active and that God had healed the woman the moment she touched him. In his sovereign grace and mercy, God knew of this woman’s faith and immediately healed her the moment she touched Jesus in the midst of this mass of humanity and chaos. Jesus’ eternal glory and power were veiled in human flesh, and from other biblical passages such as Philippians 2, we know that Jesus voluntarily set aside a number of divine attributes because he had taken upon himself the form of a servant. But despite these voluntary limitations, Jesus knew that God’s power had gone out from him. *“[Jesus] turned around in the crowd and asked, ‘Who touched my clothes?’”* Since the crowd was so large and people had crowded around Jesus on all sides, the disciples were a bit perplexed that Jesus would even know that such a thing had occurred. They ask Jesus a rather impertinent question, *“you see the people crowding against you’ . . . and yet you can ask, ‘Who touched me?’”*

Once again, the disciples are impatient. Obviously, they are in a hurry to get to Jairus’ home and to get away from the mass of people. But Jesus will not let this woman touch him with such great faith and then be dramatically healed, to simply walk away from him without speaking to her. And so we read in verse 32 that *“Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it.”* Knowing that he was looking for her, we read in verse 32, *“then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth.”* The fact that the woman made herself known to Jesus and then fell at his feet demonstrated that this woman’s heart was filled with gratitude for all that Jesus had done for her. She was truly thankful that God had healed her, and so she told Jesus about what happened.

We need to be clear that touching Jesus was not some magical act which automatically healed this woman—which seemed to be the general expectation of the crowds who were following him. Rather, the woman was healed because she touched Jesus believing that God would heal her if she could only but touch the one whom he had sent. This was the reason why God’s healing power had gone forth from Jesus just as soon as she touched him. This becomes clear in verse 34 when Jesus *“said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.’”* Jesus not only heals her, he then pronounces a divine benediction upon her—*“go in peace and be free.”* This benediction refers both to her emotional distress (“peace”) and physical illness (her suffering). Indeed, when her hemorrhage stops, her life and dignity are immediately restored to her, because she is no longer ceremonially unclean and therefore will no longer be shunned by those around her. As an interesting aside, the famous church historian Eusebius, states that this woman lived in Caesarea Philippi and later erected a copper statue by her door of a woman kneeling with hands outstretched to Jesus.<sup>6</sup> While this might be nothing but a mere legend, it does reflect the fact that the early church knew of many of the people about whom we read in the gospels.

**A**s this woman was being healed and Jesus was blessing her and sending her on her way, very bad news now reaches Jairus.

As Mark now reports, *“While Jesus was still speaking, some men came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. ‘Your daughter is dead,’ they said. ‘Why bother the teacher any more?’”* Surely, this is the worst news any parent can receive. It is bad enough that the child was sick and now had died. It must have been that much worse to know that Jesus could have actually done something to prevent this horrible thing from happening and yet was unable to get to the little girl in time. And so while the men who bring this horrible news to Jairus mean well, they ask Jairus to let Jesus go his on way since it was

---

<sup>6</sup> Cited in; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 194.

now too late to do anything for her. But Jesus had an entirely different and rather surprising response to this horrible news. *“Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, ‘Don't be afraid; just believe.’”*

Put yourself in Jairus' place for a moment. He had just witnessed a woman healed by merely touching Jesus' clothing. He had seen how Jesus reacted to her with tenderness and compassion. Jairus had, no doubt, heard Jesus tell this woman that she was healed because she believed. He had heard Jesus pronounce his benediction upon her. And now Jesus says much the same thing to him—believe and don't be afraid. But it was this woman, desperate as she was, along with the huge crowds pressing in on all sides of them, which prevented Jesus from reaching his own daughter in time. Surely Jairus was tempted to be angry at all the delay. If only Jesus could have gotten there in time. But then Jesus told him not to be afraid, that he was to believe that even though his daughter had died, Jesus would be able to do for her what Jairus had intended for Jesus to do all along—heal her. This was tough enough to do when the girl was still alive. Now there is no hope, she was dead. What Jesus was asking of him was not easy. And so in the face the worst news imaginable and under the greatest of pressure, Jairus must not be afraid and he must continue to believe that Jesus could help her despite the fact that she was dead.

Jesus now presses on to reach Jairus' home. He had a mission yet to perform, although no one would have been able to understand what it was. As we read in verse 37, Jesus takes control of the situation. *“He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James.”* The crowds were only making things worse and so Jesus dismisses them and instructs them to remain behind. He chose those three apostles who constitute the “inner circle” so to speak (the ones to whom Jesus gives nicknames),<sup>7</sup> to be witnesses of what was to follow. Indeed, things seemed beyond hope. According to Mark, *“When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly.”* There is the unmistakable sight of a family in grief and shock. We see it in the faces of those on the evening news who have experienced tragedy. We've seen the videos of Middle-Eastern women wailing when violence brings death and destruction.

In Matthew's account of this (Matthew 9:18-26) it is clear that professional mourners—flute players and wailers—had already been secured and had already arrived by the time Jesus got to the home. This was the first step in the mourning process and was the common custom of that time. This is what Mark means when he speaks of the commotion and crying and wailing. There are not only grieving family members and friends, there were professional mourners present, who by loudly wailing and playing their instruments, in effect, announce to the whole community that the worst has come to pass.<sup>8</sup> The only thing left to do was to make immediate preparations to bury the child, because from all of this it is clear that the girl is not merely in a coma nor sleeping, but that she had indeed already died.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus takes immediate action. As we learn in verses 39 and 40, *“[Jesus] went in and said to them, ‘Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.’”* The reaction of some family members and the professional mourners is predictable. *“But they laughed at him.”* When Jesus says that the child is not dead but sleeping he is not telling those gathered there that their medical diagnosis is

---

<sup>7</sup> France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 239

<sup>8</sup> Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 196.

<sup>9</sup> France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 239.

incorrect—that she is not really dead but only in a comma. Rather, Jesus is using the metaphor of sleep to tell them that even though she had indeed died, since he will raise her up, her death is not permanent and she will come back to life, just as someone wakes up from a sound sleep. The purpose of this declaration is that death will not have the last word for God’s people and there is the blessed hope and glorious promise of bodily resurrection at the end of the age.<sup>10</sup> Jesus will make this hope plain for all to see.

Jesus then “*put them all out,*” i.e., the mourners and family, who were in a sense scoffing at Jesus’ promise. “*He took the child’s father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was.*” Once they were alone with the girl’s body, Jesus “*took her by the hand and said to her, ‘Talitha koum!’ (which means, ‘Little girl, I say to you, get up!’).* *Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old).*” That Mark must explain the meaning of Aramaic words is a strong indication that his gospel is written to a largely Gentile audience. Jesus had calmed the storm. He had cast out a legion of demons. And now, at his command, Jesus raised this young girl from the dead! Mark simply says “*at this they were completely astonished.*” I’ll bet they were astonished! It was one thing for Jesus to calm the storm. It was something else when Jesus cast out the legion of demons from the poor man on the opposite shore of Galilee. But with this miracle, Jesus demonstrated that he is Lord over all things, even death itself! We can just picture, Jairus and his wife, Peter, James and John standing there with their chins on the floor with no one saying a word. Such a thing is beyond human comprehension. Everyone there, no doubt, thought of the story of Elijah from 1 Kings 4:17-24 (and our Old Testament lesson). But this man Jesus was greater than Elijah!

The account ends in verse 43, with the now familiar warning given by Jesus. “*He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.*” What had happened would soon be common knowledge, so clearly Jesus is not trying to hide what had just taken place—the so-called “messianic secret” as some critical scholars of lamely argued (i.e. Wrede). But Jesus is concerned that his identity be revealed slowly and surely over the course of his messianic mission. There was much yet for Jesus to do and the raucous crowd of mourners was not the right audience nor was this the right time to fully reveal himself. Although Jesus instructed everyone to be silent, he also knew that this little girl would need something to eat. This is all quite remarkable—all the more remarkable when we consider that the next event recounted in Mark’s gospel is Jesus being rejected in his own hometown of Nazareth.

**W**hat, then, should we take with us from this section of Mark’s gospel?

Since the raising of Jairus’ daughter from the dead is the third in a series of dramatic miracles, a number of things should now be clear. Jesus is more than a prophet. He is greater than Moses or Elijah. Jesus is Lord over all creation since he can command the winds and seas to obey him. Jesus is Lord over Satan and his whole dominion. He cast out a legion of demons from some poor man and then restored the man to his right mind. And now, the people of Israel have seen that Jesus is Lord even over death itself. In all of these miracles we see Jesus begin to overturn the curse and undo the effects of the fall of Adam upon the human race. Thus his messianic mission entails far more than just healing the sick and casting out devils and so on. Jesus has come to deal with the root cause of all human suffering.

And yet this is the very thing the multitudes don’t see because they are blinded by their immediate needs. This is what the members of the Sanhedrin and the Pharisees cannot see because of their self-righteousness. The crowds see Jesus in terms of what he can do for them. The Pharisees see Jesus as a

---

<sup>10</sup> Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 189.

threat because he exposes them for who they are. In fact, despite these amazing miracles, in the very next section in Mark's gospel, Jesus will lament the unbelief of the people.

And so when Jesus commends the woman with the hemorrhage because of her faith and tells her to go in peace and to be free, and then when he tells Jairus not to be afraid and to believe and then follows through on this by raising his daughter from the dead, we realize these two people are the exception. The woman seeks healing, but she also exercises faith in God's promise. Jairus seeks help from Jesus, but he also believes that Jesus is that one sent from God. And so as to demonstrate the true purpose of his mission, Jesus responds to them by giving the woman back her health (and her life) and by giving back to Jairus his daughter. Because they have come in faith, they become part of that first glimpse of what the future holds for all of God's people. The point is that even if the woman had not been healed and even if Jairus' daughter was not raised, they still would have believed that Jesus was sent by God and that God's will had been done, even if the outcome was not what they wanted. That is the difference between faith and unbelief. Faith accepts the outcome, regardless.

While faith grasps the promise and accepts God's will, unbelief demands an instant and immediate response. The crowds see the miracles and expect Jesus to heal them on the spot. Yet these are the same people who call for his execution when his mission ultimately takes him to Jerusalem. The Pharisees want to see Jesus put to death because he eats with tax-collectors and sinners and is not all impressed with their appearance of righteousness. His words and miracles just make them angry.

When we read his words and hear of his miracles, we must not make the same mistake and seek out Jesus so that he will fix all our problems. Like Jairus and this anonymous woman, we must come to Jesus in faith, believing that he is the one whom God has sent, and that he answers all our prayers, not necessarily according to our desires, but according to God's perfect and holy will. We may hear those glorious words "the child is not dead." We may hear tragic words, "the child has died." But no matter what happens, faith accepts the will of God. Why? Because faith grasps the fact that when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter from the dead, he was pointing us ahead to the end of the age, when Jesus himself will heal all of our diseases and raise all God's people from the dead. This is what faith grasps and understands. This is what unbelievers can never accept!