

With Jesus in the Storm: Rembrandt's Meditation

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📁 Devotionals, Experiences For Groups and Retreats

🔖 Tags: Peace, Picture Prayers, Scripture Meditation



You probably know well the story of Jesus and his disciples in their boat at sea during a raging storm (Mark 4:35-41). But you may not have ever meditated on it by using Rembrandt's famous painting of this story, *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*. Recently I was inspired to do this by an article in the *Conversations* journal, "In the Storm (<http://conversationsjournal.com/2013/03/in-the-storm/>)."

Linger with Rembrandt's masterpiece painting of this Gospel story and you'll begin to *feel* the stormy gale blowing in your face and the enormous waves tossing you up and down and splashing you with freezing cold sea water! You'll feel the force of the trials in your life that threaten to sink your boat. *You'll see yourself* in the boat and the role you play in your family, work, or other group.

Most important of all, you can find in Rembrandt's painting Jesus and his cross — you can come to experience more of his peace in the storm.

Vision Divina

Spiritual directors call meditating on a picture "Visio Divina." Applied to a Bible passage, it's an imaginative and refreshing form of Scripture meditation that helps us to enter into the narrative of Scripture and bring

ourselves to Jesus. It's similar to Lectio Divina (<http://www.soulshpherd.org/tag/lectio-divina/>), but instead of quietly listening to God through words we use a picture.

In my personal devotions and in the groups and retreats I lead for pastors, leaders, and caregivers I have found that using [Picture Prayers](http://www.soulshpherd.org/tag/picture-prayers/) (<http://www.soulshpherd.org/tag/picture-prayers/>) that come from the Bible can evoke deep personal emotions and needs, even things that we were not conscious of, which we can then pray about. It's also a great tool to help us hear God's voice, often in ways that surprise us!

It seems that a picture provides a *generous space* for each of us to project our unique self and life circumstances into so that we can then bring ourself to God. What you see in the picture is probably different from what others see. So also, the message you hear from God, spoken to you in part through the picture, is personal to you.

I invite you to join me in meditating on Mark 4:35-41 as it was painted by Rembrandt in *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*. You can do this in a time of private devotion or share this with a prayer partner or small group.

Meditate on the Gospel Passage

Mark 4:35-41 tells the story that inspired Rembrandt's painting of *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*. Read the passage slowly and prayerfully. You can do that here (<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=mark%204:35-41&version=ESV>).

What is one word or phrase that you're especially drawn to? Remain in quiet prayer to absorb this word from God.*

Meditate on Rembrandt's Painting

Now let's turn to Rembrandt's meditation on Mark 4:35-41. He painted *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee* in 1633. His painting of Jesus and his disciples in their boat on the stormy sea is dark, shrouded in shadows, but there is a ray of light streaming down to help us see what is going on in the boat.

You can meditate on *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee* using this large image of Rembrandt's painting (<http://www.soulshpherd.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/The-Storm-on-the-Sea-of-Galilee-Rembrandts-painting.jpg>). (If you're sharing this

meditation with a group then you'll want to print out copies of the picture.) Ask God to guide and direct your impressions and thoughts as you look at the painting.

What do you notice? What part of the painting or character in it does God especially draw your attention to? Quietly pray and reflect on this for a couple of minutes. [It's best to do this part *before* you do the guided parts of this meditation below. Let your mind be open to *whatever impressions or thoughts God may give you.*]

Finding Yourself in Rembrandt's Painting (Guided Meditation, Part 1)

Let's meditate on *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee* one more time. This time I will guide you. An interesting thing about the painting is that in addition to the twelve disciples who accompanied Jesus in the boat there is a *thirteenth person* sailing in the boat. *Who is that?*

Rembrandt is known to have painted himself somewhere in his paintings. He's setting an example for us to find ourselves in the Gospel, bringing to God our stress and our sin, our hurts and our hopes. (This is the way we need to meditate on Scripture. It's also what we need to do with others when we preach or teach from the Bible.)

In Rembrandt's painting each of the people with Jesus in the boat has their own reaction to the storm. It's something like the different roles that people play in a family, church, or other group. (Sometimes, particularly under stress, people's roles and reactions may be very dysfunctional!) Which person do you most identify with? (In different situations or at different times in your life you might find that you have a different reaction.)

On Top

The man in the bow of the ship is on top, riding the huge wave. He's a leader and a professional fisherman who is focused on his work earnestly trimming the front sail. Perhaps it's an adventure for him. Or maybe he's just working hard at his job.

Fixing the Problem

Three of the men (probably experienced fisherman also) are at the mast working frantically to fix the main sail. The gale winds have ripped it and snapped the metal wire so that the boom is disconnected from the mast.

Barely Hanging On!

The huge wave is pounding the man on the left in the middle and he is hanging on to a guy wire for dear life!

Afraid

Most of the crew seem afraid, but especially the man on the right side of the boat. He is crouched over and looking with dread at the enormous wave that is swamping the boat. We can almost feel him trembling with anxiety.

Sick

On the lower left in back is a distressed man with his hand on his forehead and leaning over the side of the boat. It seems he's about to throw up.

Angry at God

Two disciples appear angry at Jesus for sleeping in their storm. One shakes him awake and the other raises his voice, "Teacher! Don't you care if we drown!"

Quiet and Alone

On the lower left of the boat is a man in white that is easy to miss. His back is faced to us. He's sitting still and alone. He seems to be separated from the frightening storm and the chaos going on around him in the boat. There seems to be a shadowy figure that he's looking at. Is he having a vision? Is it an angel?

Lost

A man in a blue shirt on the left side of the boat near the back is standing and holding onto a guy wire. His other hand is on his forehead as he stares blankly out at the dark sea. Maybe he's flooded with emotion and shut down. It almost seems he is looking to us. He's close to Jesus but he's not looking at him.

Worshipping the Lord

No one is looking at Jesus, except the two angry disciples and the disciple kneeling at Jesus' feet. Only the kneeling disciple is looking at Jesus with trust and reverence. Rembrandt has painted a halo on this disciple's head to signify his faith in the Lord Jesus in the midst of the terrible storm.

At the Helm

There is one more person in the boat with Jesus. In the stern, at the very back, is the disciple at the helm, holding the tiller. He must be another experienced fisherman because he's in charge of the boat. Perhaps this is Peter. He's certainly a leader, like a lot of the pastors I work with — *like me!* He is responsible to guide the boat's course and instruct the crew on what they need to do. Maybe his hands are tightly gripping the tiller because he's been straining to keep control of the boat? Maybe

now he's just holding the tiller because he sees his friend kneeling and his attention has been drawn to Christ the Lord?

Pray About *Your* Storm

Now, bring your storm into the Gospel story. Some storms that we experience, like this one on the Sea of Galilee are dangerous. Other are storms of stress or not knowing what to do.

Your storm might be a difficulty in your family, work, or ministry. Or something personal that you're struggling with. How are you dealing with your personal storm? Which character in Rembrandt's painting do you identify with? Pray quietly about this...*

Look at Jesus (Guided Meditation, Part 2)

Look closely at Jesus. Freezing rain is pelting down on him, waves are swamping the boat, winds are whipping against him and tossing the boat around violently. Yet, *Jesus is sleeping!* Surely he is not unaware of the dangerous storm. Nor is he faking to be asleep. He must be napping. *Certainly, he is at peace.*

How could Jesus be so relaxed when he and his disciples were in such great danger? Was he planning all along to calm the storm? I doubt it. Jesus said he only did what he saw the Father doing and that always he was submitted to him.

Jesus wasn't just in the boat — *he was in his Abba's arms.* He wasn't just in the storm — *he was in the Kingdom of God.* He was at peace in the storm because he trusted his Father to care for them — no matter what happened. This is the hidden miracle in this Gospel story and it's why after Jesus calmed the storm he said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid?"

On the surface it's a *ridiculously funny question!* The disciples must have looked at each other incredulously afterwards, "Let's see. Why were we so afraid? Oh, it was the storm that nearly drowned us all at sea! Then it was realizing that we were sitting next to the Son of God with power over nature!"

Jesus was being sincere. If they learned to live with him and the Father in the Kingdom of the Heavens then they wouldn't be afraid — even in a terrible storm. Jesus was so relaxed that God's peace permeated his body. It was this peace in his body that he spoke into the storm.

In Rembrandt's painting it seems that *Jesus is looking to the opening in the heavens and the light that is breaking through*. Most everyone else in the boat is either looking at the storm or at what they're trying to do to secure themselves. Jesus is the only person on the boat who sees the source of light in the heavens.

Notice, that the light of God is not just coming from the heavens *it's also glowing from Jesus's body!* Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God! He is the Light of the World and the Prince of Peace! The disciple kneeling at Jesus' feet sees Jesus' light! Perhaps the disciple at the tiller is also is drawn to Jesus' light.

By the way, did you see the symbol of the cross of Christ right in the middle of Rembrandt's painting?

Listen to God

Listen for what God wants to say to you.

What is the Lord's *personal invitation* for you in the midst of your storm? Pray quietly about this...*

* If you're doing this spiritual formation experience with a partner or a group then it's good to facilitate people sharing their experiences with one another *after* each of three main periods of silence. I recommend that for the first share people simply speak out loud just their word or phrase with no explanation. The second sharing is effective as a personal prayer, with others interceding silently. The third sharing it works well to invite everyone to share conversationally with one another about their invitation from the Lord and then for group members to pray for one another. (See our article on "Lectio Divina (<http://www.soulshpherd.org/2008/07/lectio-divina-groups/>)" for more guidance.)