

Blind Faith or Understanding?

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We have all read Matthew 4:19-20, where Jesus says to Peter and Andrew: “Come, follow me... and I will make you fishers of men,” and at once they leave their nets and follow him. In this scene we get the impression that Peter and Andrew drop what they are doing, join Jesus, and commit their lives to him. The episode is frequently presented as a lesson in blind faith and obedience, a measure against which we should judge our own response to Jesus’ call.

I believe this is an incorrect reading. As we have seen during our studies, the four gospels are written by four different men for four different audiences from four different perspectives. None is meant to be a full biographical account of Jesus. Rather, the gospels are more like four court testimonies about the same set of events—the life, death and resurrection of Jesus—and what those events mean to the human family. If we wish to discern the facts concerning a particular episode in Jesus’ life, we must examine each gospel testimony carefully, place it in its literary, historical and cultural context, and piece together the evidence. If we do so for the calling of the disciples, we find that the facts support a very different reading from that which is often presented.

Let us focus on the key disciples: Peter, Andrew, James and John. We know from Luke 5:10 that Peter and Andrew are partners in a fishing business with Zebedee and his two sons, James and John. Together the five men run a successful fishing business with at least two boats and several employees (Luke 5:7; Mark 1:20). They are not poor men. John (and we presume his family) is of such standing that he is known to the high priest in Jerusalem and can arrange for Peter to be let into the high priest’s courtyard at Jesus’ trial, simply by talking with the girl on duty at the gate (John 18:15-16). We may also infer that James and John (like John the Baptist) were Jesus’ cousins. Matthew, Mark and John each name the women present at Jesus’ crucifixion (Luke doesn’t name the women; instead, in 23:49, he mentions that “... the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance”): Matthew 27:56 names “Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee’s sons”; Mark 15:40 notes, “Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome”; and John 19:25 reads, “[Jesus’] mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.” If we compare the lists in a chart, we can easily identify who’s who:

	Matthew	Mark	John
1	—	—	(Jesus’) mother, Mary
2	Mary Magdalene	Mary Magdalene	Mary Magdalene
3	Mary, the mother Of James and Joseph	Mary, the mother of James the younger And Joses	Mary, the wife of Clopas (and mother of James and Joseph/Joses?)
4	Mother of Zebedee’s Sons	Salome	his mother’s sister (Salome, the mother of Zebedee’s sons?)

The chart poses a few difficulties, but none that is overwhelming. First, only John lists Mary, the mother of Jesus, but one could certainly argue that Mary’s presence at the cross was so well known in the early Church that neither Matthew nor Mark needed to mention it. John does, however, for in the next verses he goes on to tell us that Jesus placed Mary in his care, and he in hers. Second, Matthew lists Mary in the third position as the mother of James and Joseph, while Mark has her as the mother of James the younger and Joses. “The younger” (*mikros* in Greek) can mean either younger in age or physically smaller (hence, the KJV translation, “James the less”); the addition is simply descriptive and suggests that the two brothers, like Alexander and Rufus in Mark 15:21, were well known to the early Christian community. The difference between Joseph and Joses seems to be a spelling variant, for in similar fashion, Matthew 13:55 lists “James and Joseph and Simon and Judas” as Jesus’ brothers, while Mark 6:3 lists them as “James and Joses and Judas and Simon.” When we move to John, we find that he identifies Mary, the mother of James and Joseph/Joses as the wife of Clopas. Finally, in the fourth position we find that Salome is the mother of Zebedees’ sons, and John identifies her as Mary’s sister, making James and John Jesus’ cousins.¹

We also learn in John’s gospel that Jesus spends time establishing his identity beyond kinship and acquaintance with these men before he calls them to discipleship. In John 1:19-28, John the Baptist is asked whether he himself is the Messiah, and he denies it, saying: “Among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie” (v. 27). The next day, John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the “Lamb of God” and testifies that he is “the Son of God” (vv. 29, 34). On the third day, Andrew and his companion, both disciples of John the Baptist, spend the day with Jesus (vv. 35-39). Late in the afternoon Andrew returns to

his brother Peter, saying “We have found the Messiah,” and he brings Peter to Jesus (v. 42). On the fourth day, Jesus leaves Bethany for Galilee, finds Philip (who, like Peter and Andrew, is from Bethsaida), and invites Philip to follow him (v. 43). The verb “finds” in the Greek suggests that Jesus was already acquainted with Philip.² In chapter two, Jesus, Peter, Andrew, Philip, and Nathaniel make the three-day journey back to Galilee, where they attend a wedding at Cana. Here, Jesus performs his first miracle in the presence of his friends, and we are told: “He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him” (2:11).

Matthew 4:18-22 and Mark 1:16-20 offer parallel accounts of another important encounter with Jesus. In both gospels, Peter, Andrew, James and John are fishing. To compare the two accounts we need a very literal translation of the Greek:

And walking beside the Sea of Galilee he saw two brothers, Simon the one being called Peter and Andrew the brother of him, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishers. And he says to them, come after me and I will make you fishers of men. And immediately leaving the nets, they followed him. And having gone on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of him, in the boat with Zebedee the father of them, preparing the nets of them, and he called them. And immediately leaving the boat and the father of them, they followed him. — Matthew 4:18-22

And passing by alongside the Sea of Galilee he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea; for they were fishers, and said to them Jesus, Come after me and I will make you to become fishers of men. And immediately leaving the nets, they followed him. And having gone on a little he saw James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of him and they were in the boat preparing the nets, and immediately he called them. And leaving the father of them Zebedee in the boat with the hired hands departed after him. —Mark 1:16-20.

We might note several important details in this scene. First, Matthew and Mark refer to the same event. The textual similarities between Matthew and Mark are commonplace in synoptic criticism, and here the two scenes are very close, even in wording and syntax. Second, Jesus is “walking beside” or “passing by alongside” the Sea of Galilee. Third, Peter and Andrew are “casting a net into the sea.” Fourth, after calling Peter and Andrew to “come after” him, Jesus moves on and meets James and John, who are in a boat with their father, Zebedee (and the hired hands), “preparing” their nets. Jesus calls them, too, and they leave the boat and their father and go with him. The scene does not suggest that Peter, Andrew, James and John leave their nets, their boats and Zebedee permanently; it simply says that when Jesus calls them, they go with him.

When we move to Luke 5:1-11 we gain additional information. This time a more fluid, dynamic equivalent translation will suffice:

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God, he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men." So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

In Luke's narrative, several points stand out in sharp contrast to Matthew's and Mark's. First Luke 5:1-11, the calling of the disciples, comes after Jesus heals the demonized man on the Sabbath at Capernaum (4:31-37), after Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law (4:38-41), and after he goes out to a solitary place to pray (4:42-44). In Mark, these events follow Jesus' calling the disciples.³ Second, in Luke, Jesus is standing by the Lake of Gennesaret⁴ with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God, not "walking beside" or "passing by alongside" the lake, as in Matthew and Mark. Third, in Luke, the boats are left at the water's edge and the fishermen are washing their nets, not "casting a net," as in Matthew and Mark: in Luke they have finished fishing for the day; in Matthew and Mark, they are still working. Fourth, in Luke, Jesus got into one of the boats... and... put out a little from shore, where he taught the people from the boat, unlike in Matthew and Mark where he calls the men from the boat and they go with him. Fifth, in Luke, Jesus has Peter put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch, and they caught a large number of fish. Notice that Peter addresses Jesus as "Master," a term that suggests not just the authority of a teacher, but an intimate relationship with that authority.⁵ This prompts Peter to fall at Jesus' knees and confess his sinfulness. Jesus then says to Peter, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men," and Peter, Andrew, James and John leave everything and follow Jesus.

Luke 5:1-11 is clearly not the same scene as Matthew 4:18-22 and Mark 1:16-20. If we piece together the events reported in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, we find that in John, Andrew and his companion are disciples of John the Baptist, who identifies Jesus as the Son of God. Andrew and his companion spend the next day with Jesus, causing Andrew to return to his brother, Peter, tell him they have found the Messiah, and bring Peter to meet Jesus. The next day Peter, Andrew, John, Philip and Nathaniel accompany Jesus on the three-day journey back to Galilee, where they attend the wedding at Cana and see Jesus perform his first miracle. Some time later, according to Matthew and

Mark, Jesus sees Peter and Andrew as they are fishing with their business partners (and Jesus' cousins?), James and John, and he asks them to follow him; they do. Later still, as Jesus is teaching by the Sea of Galilee, Luke tells us that he gets into Peter's boat, teaches offshore, and then has Peter and the men put out into deep water, where they catch a large number of fish. By this time all the men have had considerable contact with Jesus, but they have not made a whole-hearted commitment to discipleship: they have followed Jesus when he asked them to, but they are still in the fishing business, still living their own lives. In Luke, that changes. After the miraculous catch of fish, Peter recognizes that Jesus is far more than an ordinary teacher and that following him demands far more than part-time discipleship. He falls to his knees in unworthiness—and perhaps in fear, knowing that to make such a commitment involves a very uncertain future. Jesus responds, “Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men” (Luke 5:10). This is the call to full discipleship. In response, the men pull their boats up on shore, leave everything, and follow Jesus.⁶ Notice the progression in the disciples' response. In John, after the wedding at Cana, “his disciples put their faith in him”; in Matthew and Mark, “leaving the nets [and Zebedee], they followed him”; and in Luke, they “left everything and followed him.”

Jesus never asked the disciples to follow him on the basis of blind faith and instant obedience. He spent considerable time with them, building a close, personal relationship with each one. John 1:35-39 summarizes Jesus' approach:

The next day John [the Baptist] was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!” When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, “What do you want?” They said, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?” “Come,” he replied, “and you will see.” So, they went and saw where he was staying, and spent the day with him.

Notice the sequence. John the Baptist, a credible witness and one who believes that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, speaks to his friends about Jesus and identifies who he is. This raises their curiosity. They follow behind Jesus, wanting to know more, and Jesus invites them to come along with him. They do, and they spend the day together. Between this day and their full commitment several months pass. They listen to Jesus, watch him work, and grow to respect and love him. Only then does Jesus call them to be disciples, to make a full commitment to him.

Jesus' approach has important implications for each one of us today, as we lead our own Christian lives and lead others to Christ. Faith isn't a blind leap into the dark. Faith is based upon knowledge and experience, which comes from two sources: Scripture and the living witness of others. The Bible is a “letter from God,” introducing us to the Lord Jesus. Read it and study it. As Jesus himself said, all Scripture concerns him. (See Luke 24:27, 45-47; John 5:46. See also, 2 Timothy 3:16-4:5.) As important, associate yourself with a community of believers. Our intimate, personal relationship with Jesus is of primary importance, but that relationship must be lived out in

community. Again, Jesus himself said, that wherever two or three gather in his name, he is present (Matthew 18:20). Becoming a Christian is like falling in love: few people propose marriage on the first date! Get to know Jesus; become intimate with him; learn to trust him; grow to love him; then, when you do, make a full commitment to him. He asks nothing more—nor less.

Endnotes

¹ All this assumes, of course, that Matthew, Mark and John are talking about the same women. Given the close textual relationships among the synoptic gospels, such an assumption is reasonable in Matthew and Mark. John, however, does not typically rely upon Matthew and Mark as a source; with John, we have an independent witness. The fact that he names one of the women at the cross using a different relationship (Mary as wife of Clopas, rather than the mother of James and Joseph/Joses) is not especially significant, nor is saying “his mother’s sister” immediately after mentioning “his mother”; such a sequence would be quite natural. Given the importance of the crucifixion to the early Church, it is reasonable to believe that those who report on it have their facts straight. If we do assume that Matthew, Mark and John refer to the same women, then understanding James and John to be Jesus’ cousins goes a long way toward explaining why Jesus would entrust his mother to John at the cross: we know that Jesus especially loved John, and John 7:5 tells us that Jesus’ “own brothers did not believe in him.” It also explains why James, John and their mother felt they could ask Jesus for the special favor of having the two boys sit at Jesus’ right hand in his kingdom (Matthew 20:20; Mark 10:37). Raymond Brown presents a good discussion on the women at the cross in *The Gospel According to John*, 2 vols. *The Anchor Bible*, vols. 29 and 29A (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1966), vol. 2, pp. 904-906.

² This is the same word used of Andrew in verse 41 (“The first thing Andrew did was to *find* his brother Simon and tell him...”) and the same word used of Philip in verse 45 (“Philip *found* Nathanael...”). It is used again of Jesus in John 5:14 and 9:35, where he searches out and *finds* a man who had been with him earlier. Perhaps Andrew’s companion in 1:35-41 is Philip, or perhaps Jesus had met him earlier.

³ Matthew does not include the story of Jesus healing the demonized man on the Sabbath in Capernaum nor his going out to a solitary place to pray. He does include the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (8:14-17), however, but he places it in a series of teachings and healings (8:1-9:38) after the Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:29) and before commissioning the twelve as apostles (10:1-42). The series of teachings and healings illustrates the Sermon on the Mount, putting Jesus’ words into action. The events are not meant to be chronological.

⁴ The “Lake of Gennesaret” is 12¼ by 8¾ miles at the longest and broadest points respectively; it is 682 feet below sea level; and depending on the water level, it is 125-150 feet deep. It is called by several names: the “Lake of Gennesaret” (named from the plain on its northwestern shore), the “Sea of Galilee” (named from the district it is in), and the “Sea of Tiberias” (named from the city Herod built on its southwest shore). It

supported a large fishing industry, with nine towns on its west shore. In Hebrew, “sea” can mean any large body of water, including a lake or a river.

⁵ Only Luke uses “Master” as a term of address to Jesus, and it is only used by the disciples; non-disciples use “teacher,” or in the other synoptics, either “teacher” or “rabbi.”

⁶ This is a tremendously important decision for each man, but especially for Peter. Recall how Jesus tells the rich young man to sell all that he has and follow him, and Peter reminds Jesus, “We have left everything to follow you!” (Matthew 19:27). Recall, too, in Peter’s dark days after he denied Jesus how in the black of night he goes out to fish, accompanied by his friends, and catches nothing; then, in the pre-dawn light Jesus calls from the shore, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat” and they catch a huge haul of fish (John 21:1-7). The scene must certainly recall to Peter the day when Jesus called him to discipleship, for Peter leaps into the water and rushes toward the shore, his heart aching at how he had failed his Lord. The scene in Luke (22:61) when the cock crows and Jesus, being led from the house of the high priest, turns and looks straight at him is, in my judgment, the most heartbreaking scene in all of Scripture. At that moment, Peter “went outside and wept bitterly” (22:62), and we never hear from him again until John 21, when Jesus calls him from fishing and has a talk with him after breakfast. In John 21 Jesus forgives Peter for denying him, but more importantly, he enables Peter to forgive himself. Both Peter’s call to discipleship and his healing after the Resurrection are accompanied by a miraculous catch of fish.