SHORT STUDIES FOR THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Hope That Holds



Short Studies for Hard Times
Five studies in one volume

Andrew Dominguez

Trinfinity
Enterprises

Hope That Holds

Short Studies for Hard Times

Short Studies for the Christian Life

Andrew Dominguez



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A Note on the Bible Translation Used in This Book

My preferred Bible for personal study, teaching, and research is the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). I chose it because it is a word-for-word translation in today's language, built on the ancient Scripture sources: the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. I prepared the SLB myself, and the Scripture in this book is taken from it.

Where a literal phrase would mislead an English reader, the SLB gives the writer's meaning in plain words. Words added for sense are set in bold italics so you can see what is in the original and what is not.

The complete Steadfast Literal Bible is free to read, search, download, and print at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb. If you want to check a verse in its full setting or read the translation's preface and principles, that is the place to go.

Above all, my desire is not to promote one translation over another, but to faithfully teach the Word of God, encourage careful examination of the Scriptures, and help readers grow in their knowledge, understanding, and relationship with the Lord.

May every page of this book direct attention not to the translation itself, but to the truth of God's Word and the One whom it reveals.

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Holding On When Life Is Hard

Trusting God in storms, silence, and suffering

Andrew Dominguez



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Introduction

Life is hard. We pray and ask God for help, and sometimes it seems like He is not there. We know He can do miracles, yet the trials keep coming. Is God listening? Does He care? Those are honest questions, and the Bible does not run from them.

The hardest season of my life came when my own choices caught up with me and nearly cost me my marriage. What kept me holding on was not inner strength. It was a wife who did not give up on me, a pastor who listened, and a God who met me when I stopped running. I wrote this book because real endurance comes from anchoring to Christ when our own strength runs dry.

This book looks at why God allows hardship, how He works in the middle of it, what to do when He seems silent, and how keeping eternity in view changes the way we climb the mountain in front of us.

1 A storm with Jesus in the boat

In Mark 4:35-41 (SLB), Jesus and His disciples set out across the Sea of Galilee. A fierce storm came up, and waves broke over the boat. Several of those disciples were fishermen who knew that water well, yet they were afraid for their lives. Jesus was asleep in the stern.

They woke Him and asked if He cared that they were perishing. He calmed the wind and the sea, then asked them why they were afraid and how it was that they had no faith. They had already seen Him heal the

sick and cast out demons. Somehow, in the storm, they forgot who was with them.

> *And they feared a great fear, and they were saying to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?"*
> **Mark 4:41 (SLB)**

I am not much different. When life is calm, I say I trust God. When the storm hits, I panic. The storm did not mean Jesus had left them. He was in the boat the whole time.

In my lowest season, it felt like everything I had built was going under. Like the disciples in Mark 4, my first instinct was to panic and bail water on my own. Jesus did not remove every consequence overnight, but He kept my marriage and my faith from sinking. A storm does not mean Jesus left the boat.

2 Why God allows hardship

Why does God not take away our hardships? Why does He not give us what we think we need right when we need it? I do not believe God enjoys our pain. I do believe He uses it to shape us into who He wants us to be.

> *In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if it is necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the testing of your faith, much more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire, may be found for praise and honor and glory at **the** revelation of Jesus Christ.*
> **1 Peter 1:6-7 (SLB)**

Trials pull us out of our comfort zones. When we are torn away from the things we lean on, we see that our trust has to be found completely in Christ. That raises a hard question. Where do I keep my security? In money, friendships, reputation, my job, my family? None of those are bad, but none of them can hold the full weight of my life.

Life has peaks and valleys. On the peaks, things are good, and that is often when my attention to God starts to slip. In the valleys I am forced to lean on Him again. I am learning to see the valleys as opportunities to grow in character and give God the glory.

3 Three ways God works

I have found it helpful to think about three ways God works in our lives. Sometimes He works by intervention. He does something only He can do, and our part is simply to receive it. That is the miracle we usually pray for.

Sometimes He works by interaction. He oversees the circumstances while calling us to step in and act. We become His hands and feet, and He accomplishes His purpose through our obedience.

And sometimes He works by inner action. He does not change the circumstances at all. He changes us. The miracle happens on the inside. Paul prayed three times for God to remove his thorn in the flesh, and God answered, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9, SLB).

When I do not see God changing my situation, I want to ask whether He is changing me. That may be the bigger miracle.

4 When heaven is silent

God speaks to us through His Word, through prayer, through His church, and through the circumstances of life. Sometimes He also speaks through silence. Silence tests whether my faith is real. Am I a fair-weather friend of God, or a faithful follower? Do I worship Him for who He is, or only for what He gives me?

Job asked God why, over and over. When God finally answered, He did not explain Job's suffering. Instead He asked Job questions about creation that showed His power and care (Job 38-41, SLB). Job's comfort did not come from answers. It came from seeing God as He is. I have learned that the deepest comfort we receive comes from God's character, not from explanations.

God also gives us a rhythm of rest. In Exodus 20:8-11 (SLB) He set aside one day in seven for His people. Being still before Him is not wasted time. It is often where we hear Him best.

When I started recovery on May 29, 2020, I faced the damage I had caused one day at a time. I wanted quick proof that everything would be fixed. What I had instead was something better: God was there every step of the way. He never left me, and I never felt that He had. Even when the answers come slowly, His presence does not.

5 Keep climbing

Pastor Francis Chan made this picture well known. Imagine a rope that stretches on forever. A short red section at one end stands for your life on earth. The rest stands for eternity. Most of us spend our energy on that little red piece and forget about the rest of the rope.

Paul put it this way: "we look not at the things being seen but at the things not being seen; for the things being seen are temporary, but the things not being seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18, SLB). Keeping eternity in view does not make today's pain disappear. It puts it in its proper size.

There are practical ways to prepare for the next storm. Walk by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16, SLB). Put on the full armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-17, SLB). Spend time in Scripture and in prayer every day. Confess your trespasses and stay accountable (James 5:16, SLB). Flee youthful desires (2 Timothy 2:22, SLB). Rely on Christ's strength (Philippians 4:13, SLB).

And remember the reward. James 1:12 (SLB) says the man "who endures trial" will "receive the crown of life." Without Jesus, I am nobody. With Him, I can keep climbing.

Facing Death with Hope

Grief, heaven, and the promise of eternal life

Andrew Dominguez



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Introduction

Every one of us will face death, first in the people we love and then for ourselves. Most of us would rather not think about it. But sooner or later the phone rings, or the doctor sits down, and the question cannot be avoided anymore.

I have led Bible studies, served as a lay pastor and preached. Grief is heavy even when you know where a loved one has gone, because the empty chair is still real. I wrote this book to give hurting believers plain Scripture to hold onto when death comes close. Christian hope does not erase sorrow, but it takes away the panic.

This book is for anyone who is grieving, anyone who is afraid of dying, and anyone who wants to know what happens next. The Bible does not give easy answers, but it gives real hope.

1 The question no one can avoid

The Bible is honest about death.

> *And inasmuch as it is appointed to men to die once, and after this judgment.*
> **Hebrews 9:27 (SLB)**

Death is not the end of a person. After it comes judgment, a meeting with God. That sounds frightening, and it should get our attention. But Jesus came so that the meeting does not have to be one we dread. He said, "the one who hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life, and does

not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24, SLB).

In project management we plan for every risk we can. Death is the one appointment no schedule can push back. Every person has to settle what comes after this life before the clock runs out.

2 Jesus at a graveside

When Jesus' friend Lazarus died, Jesus went to the family. Martha met Him on the road, hurting and a little upset that He had not come sooner. Jesus gave her a promise.

> *I am the resurrection and the life. The **one** believing in Me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone living and believing in Me will certainly never die. Do you believe this?*
> **John 11:25-26 (SLB)**

Then He went to the tomb, and the shortest verse in most English Bibles tells us what He did: "Jesus wept" (John 11:35, SLB). He knew He was about to raise Lazarus, and He still wept. Grief is not a lack of faith. The Son of God cried at a funeral.

"The LORD is near to the broken of heart, and the crushed of spirit He saves" (Psalm 34:18, SLB). If you are grieving, He is not standing far off. He is near.

3 Grieving with hope

Paul wrote to believers who had lost loved ones and were worried about them.

> *But I do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, concerning those who have fallen asleep, so that you may not grieve, just as also the rest who have no hope.*
>
> **1 Thessalonians 4:13 (SLB)**

Paul did not say, "Do not grieve." He said do not grieve without hope. There is "a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance" (Ecclesiastes 3:4, SLB). Tears are part of love.

What do you say to a friend whose parent just died? People ask me that question often. Most of the time the best answer is very little. Sit with them. Cry with them. Bring a meal. God is the "God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those in every affliction" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4, SLB). When they ask why God allowed it, it is all right to say, "I do not know, but I know He is good and He is here."

4 What happens when a believer dies

Jesus told the thief on the cross, "today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43, SLB). Not someday. Today. Paul said we are pleased "rather to be absent out of the body and to be at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8, SLB), and that "to depart and to be with Christ" is "very much better" (Philippians 1:23, SLB).

Believers often ask whether their loved ones are asleep in the ground or with the Lord right now. When I translated Paul's words for the SLB, the answer was plain: absent from the body, at home with

the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). God did not leave us guessing about the moment after a believer's last breath.

That is not the end of the story. When Christ comes for His church, "the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are living, who remain, will be caught away together with them" (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, SLB). Our bodies will be raised and changed. Paul then says, "Therefore encourage one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18, SLB).

> *And when this corruptible puts on incorruption, and this mortal puts on immortality, then the word that has been written will come to pass:*
> "*Death has been swallowed up in victory.*"
> "*Where, O death,* ***is*** *your sting? Where, O Hades,* ***is*** *your victory?*"
>
> **1 Corinthians 15:54-55 (SLB)**

5 What heaven is like

Heaven is not floating on a cloud forever. Jesus said He was going to prepare a place for us (John 14:2, SLB). The risen Jesus had a real body that could be touched, and He ate with His disciples (Luke 24:39-43, SLB). The Bible ends with a new heaven and a new earth, a real place where God lives with His people.

> *Look, the tabernacle of God **is** with men, and He will tabernacle with them, and they will be His peoples, and God Himself will be with them, their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death will not be any longer, nor mourning nor crying nor pain will be any longer, because the first things passed away.*
> **Revelation 21:3-4 (SLB)**

The best thing about heaven is not the streets or the gates. It is that God is there. Every tear you have cried will be wiped away by His own hand.

The Bible is also honest that not everyone will be there. Jesus spoke of eternal punishment and eternal life (Matthew 25:46, SLB). That is why the next chapter matters more than anything else in this book.

6 What your salvation depends on

Whether you face death with hope depends on one thing: whether you belong to Jesus Christ. Not on how good your life was, how many people come to your funeral, or what you hope is true. On Him.

> *For God so loved the world, that He gave His Son, the only begotten, so that everyone who believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.*
> **John 3:16 (SLB)**

Christ "died for our sins" and "has been raised on the third day" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4, SLB). He went through death and came out the other side, and He offers to take you through it too. Salvation is not something you get after you die. You receive it here,

while you are alive. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13, SLB).

If you have never trusted Him, do not wait for a better time. Tell Him you know you have sinned. Tell Him you believe Jesus died for you and rose again. Ask Him to save you. Then you can say with David, "Even when I walk in a valley of deep darkness, I will not fear evil, for You are with me" (Psalm 23:4, SLB).

Living in Hope of the Return of Christ

The Rapture, the Tribulation, and the hope we share

Andrew Dominguez



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Introduction

I believe Jesus is coming back. He will come personally and visibly, just as He said. I also believe He will first gather His church to Himself before the seven years of Tribulation the prophets describe. That view is called the pre-tribulation Rapture, and this book explains why I hold it.

I also want to be fair to Christians who read these passages another way. Good, Bible-believing people have landed in different places on the timing. You will find each of the main views here. Most of all, I want you to see that none of these views decides whether a person is saved. Your salvation rests on something much firmer than a timeline, and the last chapter shows you what that is.

1 What all Christians share

Before we look at where Christians differ, it helps to see how much we agree on. When Jesus went up into heaven, two angels told the disciples what to expect next.

> *who also said, "Galilean men, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same manner as you watched Him going into heaven.*"
>
> **Acts 1:11 (SLB)**

The same Jesus. In the same way. Believers across the centuries have confessed this. The Apostles' Creed says that He will come to judge the living and

the dead. The dead will be raised, God will judge the world in righteousness, and those who belong to Christ will be with Him forever.

Every view in this book agrees on those things. Where Christians differ is in the order of events and how to read some of the prophetic passages. Those are real questions and worth studying. They are not the center of the faith.

Over the years, at work and on mission trips, I have served alongside Christians from many different churches. We did not agree on every detail, but we stood together on the core truth: Jesus died, rose again and is coming back. Every true believer shares that certainty.

2 The hope I hold

The word Rapture is not in most English Bibles. It comes from the Latin translation of 1 Thessalonians 4:17, where "caught away" ("caught up" in many English Bibles) was rendered with a form of the verb rapio, to snatch or carry away. The idea is very much in the text.

> *because the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout of command, with **the** voice of an archangel and with **the** trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are living, who remain, will be caught away together with them in **the** clouds to meet the Lord in **the** air; and so we will always be with **the** Lord.*
> **1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 (SLB)**

I believe this gathering happens before the Tribulation begins. Here is the order as I understand it. Christ comes for His church and meets us in the air. The seven-year Tribulation follows on earth. At the end of it, Christ returns to the earth with His saints, defeats His enemies, and reigns for a thousand years. Then comes the final judgment and the new heaven and new earth.

Why do I think the church is gathered first? Jesus promised to come and take His people to the place He is preparing (John 14:2-3, SLB). Paul wrote that "God did not appoint us for wrath" (1 Thessalonians 5:9, SLB), and the Tribulation is a time when God pours out His wrath on a rebellious world. To a faithful church Jesus said, "I also will keep you from the hour of testing which is about to come upon the whole inhabited world" (Revelation 3:10, SLB).

I also believe His coming for the church is imminent. Nothing on the prophetic calendar has to happen first. That is why Paul could call it "the blessed hope" (Titus 2:13, SLB) and why the change he describes happens "in an instant, in the blink of an eye" (1 Corinthians 15:51-52, SLB). We are told to live ready every day.

I hold a pre-tribulation Rapture and read Bible prophecy literally unless the text itself shows otherwise. That hope is not a chart for me. It is an anchor. Living ready to meet Jesus at any moment, out of trust and not panic, steadies us when life feels uncertain.

3 The Tribulation and what follows

Daniel's prophecy of seventy weeks ends with a final week, a period of seven years. A coming ruler "will make a covenant strong for the many for one seven," and "in the middle of the seven he will cause sacrifice and grain offering to cease" (Daniel 9:27, SLB). Revelation speaks of forty-two months and of 1,260 days, each one half of those seven years (Revelation 11:2-3; 12:6, SLB).

> *For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not happened from **the** beginning of **the** world until now, nor by any means will happen.*
> **Matthew 24:21 (SLB)**

Even in that dark time God is still saving people. Revelation 7 (SLB) describes 144,000 sealed from the tribes of Israel, whom I understand as Jewish believers. It also describes "a great multitude which no one was able to number, out of every nation" (Revelation 7:9, SLB). The elder says, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation, and they washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Revelation 7:14, SLB). I understand them as people who come to Christ after the church has been gathered.

At the end of those seven years, John saw heaven opened and a rider on a white horse "called Faithful and True" (Revelation 19:11, SLB). The armies in heaven follow Him (Revelation 19:14, SLB). This is the Second Coming to the earth. Then come the thrones and the thousand-year reign of Christ (Revelation 20:4, SLB), the great white throne

judgment (Revelation 20:11-12, SLB), and the new creation where God dwells with His people (Revelation 21:3, SLB).

When I teach prophecy, people often ask whether God is finished with Israel. The literal promises of Scripture always point back to God's faithfulness. God will keep every promise He made to Israel, and Christ will reign as King. History is moving toward the end God appointed.

4 How other Christians read it

I hold the pre-tribulation view because I believe it fits the passages best. Other believers have studied the same Bible with the same care and reached other conclusions. Here are the main views on the timing of the Rapture, stated the way their own teachers would state them.

Mid-tribulation. The church is gathered at the middle of the seven years, before the worst judgments of the second half. Many who hold this view connect Paul's "last trumpet" (1 Corinthians 15:52, SLB) with the seventh trumpet in Revelation 11:15 (SLB).

Pre-wrath. The church goes through the first part of the Tribulation and is gathered before the Day of the Lord's wrath begins, sometime in the second half. This view separates the persecution believers suffer from the wrath God pours out.

Post-tribulation. The church goes through the whole Tribulation. The Rapture and the Second Coming are one event at the end. Believers rise to meet the Lord

in the air and return with Him to the earth. Those who hold this view point to Jesus gathering His elect "immediately after the tribulation of those days" (Matthew 24:29-31, SLB) and to Paul's statement that the day of Christ will not come "unless the apostasy comes first and the man of sin is revealed" (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3, SLB).

Partial Rapture. A smaller group teaches that only believers who are watchful and ready will be taken before the Tribulation.

Christians also differ on the thousand years in Revelation 20. Premillennial believers, both dispensational and historic, expect Christ to return before a future reign on earth. Amillennial believers understand the thousand years as a symbol of Christ's present reign, from His first coming to His second. Postmillennial believers expect the gospel to spread until the world sees a long season of righteousness, with Christ returning after it. Preterist believers hold that much of the prophecy in Matthew 24 and Revelation was fulfilled in the first century, when Jerusalem fell in A.D. 70. Most of them still look for Jesus' future, bodily return.

I disagree with some of these readings. I do not doubt the faith of the people who hold them.

5 Why the timing does not decide your salvation

I want to say this as plainly as I can. A person's view of the Rapture does not determine whether that person is saved. You can be wrong about the order of

the last days and be right with God. You can be right about every detail of prophecy and still be lost.

> *But concerning that day and the hour no one knows, not even the angels of the heavens, except My Father alone.*
> **Matthew 24:36 (SLB)**

Jesus did not give us a calendar. Anyone who sets a date has already gone beyond what He said. Whether you believe in a pre-tribulation Rapture, as I do, or believe Christians will go through the whole Tribulation, the signs of the times should have the same effect on all of us. They should push us to reach as many people as we can with the time we have.

I have known believers who love Jesus deeply yet disagree with me on the timing of the Rapture. We should study Scripture carefully, but never treat end-times timing as the test of whether someone is saved. Salvation is settled by faith in Jesus, not by a timeline.

Paul asked the believers in Rome, "why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ" (Romans 14:10, SLB). Prophecy is never a reason for contempt. The goal of studying it is to love Jesus more and to live clean while we wait.

> *Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not yet been revealed what we will be. But we know that when He is revealed, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.*
> **1 John 3:2-3 (SLB)**

6 What your salvation depends on

If your salvation does not rest on your view of the end times, what does it rest on? It rests on Jesus Christ and what He has done. Paul called this the message of first importance.

> *For I delivered to you among **the** first **things** what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He has been raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.*
> **1 Corinthians 15:3-4 (SLB)**

It does not rest on how good you have been, which church you attend, or how much you know. Scripture says "all sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23, SLB). Salvation is a gift you receive, not a wage you earn.

> *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this **is** not from yourselves; the gift **is** of God, not from works, so that no one may boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8-9 (SLB)**

Paul tells us how to receive it: "if you confess with your mouth Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God raised Him out of the dead, you will be saved"

(Romans 10:9, SLB). Peter said, "there is not salvation in any other" (Acts 4:12, SLB). The thief on the cross had no time to study prophecy or be baptized. He simply asked Jesus to remember him, and Jesus said, "today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:42-43, SLB).

If you have never trusted Christ, you can do it right now. Tell Him you know you have sinned. Tell Him you believe He died for you and rose again. Ask Him to forgive you and be your Lord. There are no magic words. He hears an honest heart. Then you can have the assurance John wrote about: "The one who has the Son has life" (1 John 5:12, SLB). Whenever He comes, you will be ready.

I was baptized on October 19, 1995, as a public step of faith in Jesus Christ. Neither my baptism, my church service nor my years of Bible study could earn me a place in heaven. Everything depends on what Jesus finished on the cross. When salvation rests on Christ, you can look forward to His return with confidence.

Lessons from the Life of Paul

From persecutor to apostle

Andrew Dominguez



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Introduction

Next to Jesus, Paul may be the most influential person in the history of the Christian faith. He went from hunting down Christians to spending his whole life spreading the gospel. He traveled through Asia Minor and Europe, planted churches, and wrote thirteen letters that are part of our New Testament.

Paul's life shows that no one is too far off track for God to turn around and use. I drifted from God more than once before coming back and serving, so I relate to a man who had to unlearn his pride and start over by grace. I wrote this book for believers who want practical lessons from how God shaped Paul.

This book follows Paul's life from his upbringing to his final days, and draws lessons for our own walk with God along the way. If God could change Paul, He can change anyone.

1 Prepared before he knew it

Paul was born a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, in a family of Pharisees, in the city of Tarsus (Acts 22:3; 23:6; Philippians 3:5, SLB). His Hebrew name was Saul. Tarsus was a center of trade and learning steeped in Greek culture. He grew up speaking Greek, studied the law in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, and inherited Roman citizenship from his family (Acts 22:3, 25-28, SLB).

He also learned a trade as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3, SLB), which later let him support himself as he preached.

Every one of those things would matter later. His knowledge of the Scriptures, his Greek, his citizenship, and his trade all became tools in God's hands. God often prepares us long before we understand what for. Nothing in your past is wasted when it is surrendered to Him.

At 16, I passed the California High School Proficiency Exam early and aced the Air Force tests, expecting a computer job. When they would not give it to me, I walked away and thought my plan was ruined. Decades later, after about 35 years at a public utility and ten years running a computer repair business, I can see how God used those skills in my writing and ministry. God prepares us through closed doors and ordinary jobs long before we see His plan.

2 Met on the road

Saul was zealous for the traditions of his fathers. He stood by approving when Stephen was stoned (Acts 7:58; 8:1, SLB). Saul was "entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he was delivering them to prison" (Acts 8:3, SLB). He went on "breathing out threats and murder against the disciples" (Acts 9:1, SLB).

On the road to Damascus, "a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun," shone around him, and he heard the voice of Jesus (Acts 26:13-15, SLB). Blinded, he was led into the city. There a disciple named Ananias, who had every reason to be afraid of him, went and laid hands on him (Acts 9:10-18, SLB).

> *But the Lord said to him, "Go, for this **man** is a vessel of choice to Me, to carry My name before Gentiles and kings and **the** sons of Israel."*
> **Acts 9:15 (SLB)**

Paul never got over the grace he was shown. Years later he wrote, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am foremost" (1 Timothy 1:15, SLB). No one is too far gone for God to reach.

My Damascus road did not come with a bright light. It came on May 29, 2020, when my wife caught me drinking. Until that day I was doing well at work and denying I had a problem. Being stopped in my tracks hurt, but it was the mercy I needed. Sometimes God interrupts our path sharply because that is the only way to save us from ourselves (Acts 9:3-6).

3 Years of preparation

Paul did not become a missionary overnight. He spent time in Arabia, returned to Damascus, and after three years went up to Jerusalem to visit Peter (Galatians 1:17-18, SLB). The believers there were afraid of him until Barnabas stood up for him (Acts 9:26-27, SLB). Later he spent years in his home region before Barnabas went looking for him and brought him to Antioch (Acts 11:25-26, SLB).

In Antioch "the disciples were first called Christians" (Acts 11:26, SLB). From that church, the Holy Spirit set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work He had called them to (Acts 13:2-3, SLB).

Two lessons stand out to me. God's timing includes seasons of quiet preparation. And every Paul needs a Barnabas, someone willing to vouch for a new believer when others hold back.

Before I translated the Steadfast Literal Bible or wrote my books, I spent years studying Scripture and teaching small groups. There were no shortcuts to learning to handle God's Word carefully. God rarely rushes the preparation when He is building something meant to last (Galatians 1:17-18).

4 Grace for the Gentiles

Paul's travels took him to Cyprus, through Galatia, and later across into Macedonia and Greece. Everywhere he went, some believed and others opposed him. In Lystra he was stoned and left for dead, yet the next day he went on to the next city (Acts 14:19-20, SLB). In Philippi he and Silas were beaten and thrown in jail, and "about midnight Paul and Silas, praying, were singing hymns to God" (Acts 16:25, SLB). The jailer and his whole household came to faith that night.

The biggest battle was over grace itself. Some taught that Gentile believers had to keep the law of Moses to be saved (Acts 15:1, SLB). The church met in Jerusalem, and Peter said, "through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we believe that we are saved in the same manner as they also" (Acts 15:11, SLB). Paul spent the rest of his life defending that truth.

Paul also had a sharp disagreement with Barnabas over John Mark, and they went separate ways (Acts

15:37-39, SLB). Yet years later Paul wrote, "Take Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry" (2 Timothy 4:11, SLB). Broken relationships between believers can be restored.

For five straight years I helped lead youth mission trips to Baja, Mexico, twice a year. We served alongside believers from a different culture who shared the same Savior. Crossing that border is a reminder that the gospel belongs to every nation and language (Acts 13:47).

5 Strength in weakness

Paul's life was not easy. He listed beatings, shipwrecks, dangers from rivers and robbers, hunger, cold, and the daily pressure of care for all the churches (2 Corinthians 11:24-28, SLB). He was arrested in Jerusalem, held for two years in Caesarea, shipwrecked on the way to Rome, and spent years in chains.

He also wrote of a thorn in the flesh that God did not take away. Instead, the Lord told him something that has carried countless believers since.

> *And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*
>
> **2 Corinthians 12:9 (SLB)**

Paul did not depend on clever speech. He told the Corinthians, "I decided not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1

Corinthians 2:2, SLB). When we feel weakest, we are in the best position to depend on God's strength.

In my lowest season, I had made choices that hurt my marriage and the people closest to me, and I had no strength left. A 12-step program and leaning on God day by day taught me that admitting weakness is where real strength begins. God's power shows up clearest when ours runs out (2 Corinthians 12:9).

6 Finishing well

Paul's last letter, Second Timothy, was written from prison in Rome. Many had deserted him, and only Luke was with him (2 Timothy 4:10-11, 16, SLB). He asked Timothy to bring his cloak, "and the books, especially the parchments" (2 Timothy 4:13, SLB). Even near the end, he kept reading and studying.

> *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on **there** is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me in that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing.*
>
> **2 Timothy 4:7-8 (SLB)**

Scripture does not record Paul's death. Church tradition holds that he was executed in Rome under Nero. Whatever the details, he had already written, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21, SLB).

Paul's life asks me a question. Am I pressing on? He wrote, "forgetting the things behind and reaching forward to the things ahead, I pursue toward the goal

for the prize of the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13-14, SLB). That crown is promised to all who love His appearing.

After about 40 years of work and 36 years of marriage, I think more about how I finish than how I started. I have seen people start strong in faith and coast near the end. I want to stay faithful in my marriage, my church and my writing one day at a time. Finishing well is not an accident (2 Timothy 4:7).

The Mustard Seed and the Storm

Studies in Mark | Mark 4:30-41

Andrew Dominguez

Trinfinity Enterprises

The Mustard Seed and the Storm

Studies in Mark | Mark 4:30-41

Passage	Mark 4:30-41
Big idea	God's kingdom starts small and grows beyond anything we can picture, and the King who rules it has power over every storm we face.
Memory verse	Mark 4:41
Session length	60-75 minutes
What to bring	Bible (SLB), this handout, pen. If you can, bring a few mustard seeds to pass around.

Before You Meet (Leader Prep)

For the leader only. Read the passage at least twice during the week and pray for the group by name.

In work and in my walk with God, I have seen small seeds of faith grow over years, and I have seen storms hit out of nowhere. The same Jesus who grows His quiet kingdom also commands the wind and the waves (Mark 4:30-41). I wrote this study for believers who feel their faith is too small or their storm is too loud.

I have worked on guitars for more than 20 years, and for about the last 4 I have built under the Trinfinity Guitars name. Trinfinity Enterprises is also the name I publish my books under, and my faith books are free to read and share. None of it started with a big

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launch. It started with one project at a time. Big things in life and ministry usually start smaller than anyone notices.

- Read all of Mark 4 and the first verses of Mark 5. The storm happens on the way to the other side of the lake, and Mark 5:1 shows where they landed.
- Look at a map of the Sea of Galilee so you can show the group where Capernaum is and where "the other side" was.
- Pick up a small jar of mustard seed from the spice aisle. Seeing how tiny it is makes the point better than any description.

Opening (5-10 minutes)

Most big things start small. A huge oak starts as an acorn. A church that seats thousands may have started in someone's living room. Jesus used two pictures in this passage: a tiny seed that becomes a large plant, and a storm that turned grown fishermen into scared kids. One shows how God's kingdom grows. The other shows who is really in charge of it.

First, what is a parable? The word comes from the Greek *parabole*, which means to place one thing beside another so you can compare them (Vine's Expository Dictionary). A parable sets something we know from everyday life next to a spiritual truth we do not yet understand. It takes us from the known to the unknown, usually in a short story with a setting, something that happens, and a result.

Icebreaker: What is something in your life that started small and grew into something bigger than you expected: a friendship, a business, a hobby, a family?

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The Passage (10 minutes)

Have one or two people read the passage aloud.

Mark 4:30-34 (SLB)

30 And He was saying, "To what shall we liken the kingdom of
God? Or in what parable shall we compare it? 31 ***It is*** like a grain
of mustard, which, when it is sown on the earth, is smaller than
all the seeds that ***are*** on the earth; 32 and when it is sown, it
grows up and becomes greater than all the garden plants, and
produces great branches, so that the birds of the sky are able to
nest under its shade." 33 And with many such parables He was
speaking the word to them, as they were able to hear. 34 But
without a parable He was not speaking to them; but privately He
was explaining all things to His disciples.

Mark 4:35-41 (SLB)

35 And He says to them on that day, evening having come, "Let us
pass over to the other side." 36 And having dismissed the crowd,
they take Him along as He was in the boat; and other little boats
also were with Him. 37 And a great storm of wind comes, and the
waves were breaking into the boat, so that it was already being
filled. 38 And He Himself was on the stern, sleeping on the
cushion. And they wake Him and say to Him, "Teacher, does it
not concern You that we are perishing?" 39 And having been
awakened, He rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Be quiet!
Be silenced!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.
40 And He said to them, "Why are you so fearful? How ***is it that***
you do not have faith?" 41 And they feared a great fear, and they
were saying to one another, "Who then is this, that even the
wind and the sea obey Him?"

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Setting the Scene (5 minutes)

Who wrote it	John Mark, a helper of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 12:25) and later close to Peter, who calls him "my son" (1 Peter 5:13). Early church writers said Mark wrote down what Peter preached (Papias, quoted by Eusebius, Church History 3.39.15). The Gospel itself does not name its author.
To whom	Mostly Gentile believers, likely in Rome. Mark explains Jewish customs and Aramaic words for readers who would not know them (Mark 7:3-4; Mark 5:41).
When and where	The events took place on and around the Sea of Galilee. Mark likely wrote in the 50s or 60s A.D.; scholars differ on the exact date.
What comes before	Jesus taught a large crowd from a boat (Mark 4:1). He told the parable of the sower (Mark 4:3-20), the lamp (Mark 4:21-25) and the seed that grows while the farmer sleeps (Mark 4:26-29).
What comes after	They reach the other side, the country of the Gerasenes, where Jesus frees a man from a legion of demons (Mark 5:1-20). Jesus has power over the sea and over the spirit world.

What It Means (15 minutes)

Verses 30-31: The smallest of seeds

Jesus asks, "To what shall we liken the kingdom of God" (Mark 4:30)? How did God's kingdom on earth look 2,000 years ago?

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Pretty small. For centuries it had mostly been tied to one nation, Israel. That does not mean God was absent from everyone else. It means His attention and focus were on His people. Gentiles (people who were not Israelites) could join only by becoming part of Israel and following the Lord's commands. Even in Jesus' day His followers were a small group of fishermen, tax collectors and ordinary people.

"Sown" means scattering seed broadly over the ground so it can grow. Jesus picked the mustard seed because everyone in His day knew it and knew how tiny it was. Black mustard seed is only about 1 mm across (about the size of a pinhead), according to the PROSEA plant database. Jesus' point is not a botany lesson. The mustard seed was the smallest seed His listeners planted in their gardens, and it was the common picture for something tiny.

Jesus used the same seed when He talked about faith: "if you have faith like a grain of mustard, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20). True faith is not about how big it feels. It is about who it rests on. Even the weakest, mustard-seed faith works because it is faith in God, and "For with God no declaration will be impossible" (Luke 1:37).

I wrote New Beginnings, a Scripture-based 12-step course, because recovery showed me how much believers need a Christ-centered path. I did not know who would read it. I just put the lessons on paper. Jesus compared God's kingdom to a mustard seed that starts tiny and grows large (Mark 4:30-32). God asks us to plant the small seed in front of us and trust Him with the growth.

Verse 32: Large enough for the birds

The seed "grows up and becomes greater than all the garden plants, and produces great branches" (Mark 4:32). The words about birds nesting in its shade come from the Old Testament. In Ezekiel, God promises to plant a tender sprig on the mountain of Israel that grows into a great cedar, and "under it shall dwell every bird of every wing; in the shadow of its branches they shall dwell" (Ezekiel

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17:23). Daniel 4:12 uses the same kind of picture for a great kingdom that shelters everyone.

This fits the New Testament church. It started small and humble and grew as it matured. Jesus sent His followers "to the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8), and John saw "a great multitude which no one was able to number, out of every nation" (Revelation 7:9). The branches are His people, and the leaves and fruit are the blessings that come through them, inside and out.

It also fits one person's faith. As your faith grows, so does the fruit of the Spirit in your life. You know a true believer by their fruit: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23).

The tree also pictures salvation, which grows so large that it gives the birds shelter, protection, safety, comfort and fellowship. As the birds find shelter in the tree, we find shelter through salvation. As they find food there, we find nourishment through the Holy Spirit.

Right now the kingdom can look small next to the world's political and military powers. But what we see is still the seed, not the full-grown plant. It keeps growing, and one day it will be big enough to give safety and rest to everyone who lives in its branches.

Verses 33-34: Read it, then explain it

Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables "as they were able to hear" (Mark 4:33), but "privately He was explaining all things to His disciples" (Mark 4:34). Here Jesus is doing what we would call expository teaching: He gives the Word, then explains what it means.

You can see the same thing in Nehemiah: "They read in the book, in the law of God, making it clear and giving the sense, and they understood the reading" (Nehemiah 8:8). First you read the Word to the people. Second, you explain it so they understand it.

What a blessing it must have been to get a private tutoring session on Scripture from God Himself. Jesus also said parables would reveal truth to those who were ready to hear and hide it from

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those with hard hearts (Mark 4:11-12, quoting Isaiah 6:9-10). Some people walked away scratching their heads.

Verses 35-37: The storm

That evening Jesus said, "Let us pass over to the other side" (Mark 4:35). They were on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, near Capernaum, heading east. After a long day of teaching He may have wanted quiet time with His Father, away from the crowd.

The Sea of Galilee sits nearly 700 feet below sea level, with hills and mountains around it. When cool air comes down off those hills and meets the warm air over the water, a calm lake can turn violent fast (That the World May Know). These fishermen knew this lake. If they were scared, this was no ordinary storm. The boat was "already being filled" (Mark 4:37).

In May 2020 my life hit a sudden storm. My drinking caught up with me, and my wife caught me. It was tempting to wonder whether my marriage and future were finished. The disciples woke Jesus in a violent squall, and He calmed the sea with a word (Mark 4:37-39). Even when the waves are crashing, He has never left the boat.

Verses 38-39: Asleep in the stern

Jesus was "on the stern, sleeping on the cushion" (Mark 4:38). Why does that matter? It shows His human side. He was worn out from a full day of teaching and healing, so tired a storm did not wake Him. John also tells us Jesus got "wearied from the journey" (John 4:6). It also shows His complete trust in His Father.

The disciples woke Him up with a hard question: "Teacher, does it not concern You that we are perishing" (Mark 4:38)? Think about a time you went through something hard while someone who loved you was right there and let you work through it. Remember learning to ride a bike? You were scared of getting hurt, and maybe you wondered why the person holding the seat let go. But they were close by the whole time, ready to grab you and comfort you if you fell. Jesus was in that boat with His disciples too.

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Then comes one of Jesus' greatest miracles, and it shows He is God. He did not yell or panic. He "rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Be quiet! Be silenced!'" (Mark 4:39). The word for "be silenced" is phimoo, which means to muzzle (Blue Letter Bible). Mark used the same word when Jesus told a demon, "Be silenced" (Mark 1:25). The wind ceased "and there was a great calm" (Mark 4:39). Not slowly calmer. A great calm, right then.

Any Jewish listener would remember that only God rules the sea: "You rule over the swelling of the sea; when its waves rise, You calm them" (Psalm 89:9) and "He settled the storm into a calm, and their waves were hushed" (Psalm 107:29).

Verses 40-41: Who then is this?

Jesus asks, "Why are you so fearful? How is it that you do not have faith" (Mark 4:40)? Do Jesus and the Father question our faith when we do not rely on Them for everything? Has your lack of faith ever led you down a road of fear? Remember, Jesus is right there with you. He is your rock and your salvation.

Then "they feared a great fear" (Mark 4:41). This time they were not afraid of the storm. They were afraid of the power Jesus showed by calming it with a word. They may have already believed He was the Messiah, but now they were starting to see He truly is who He says He is. Their question, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?" (Mark 4:41), shows they still did not fully understand.

That reminds me of what Jesus told Thomas: "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed" (John 20:29). The disciples, the Pharisees and the crowds all saw His miracles, and not all of them believed. Those of us who have never seen Him and still trust Him have been blessed.

Today I am sober since May 29, 2020, still married after 36 years, and watching my daughters and granddaughters grow. I could not have saved my own life or my marriage through willpower. The disciples looked at the calm water and asked who this was that even the wind and sea obeyed Him (Mark 4:41). When God brings

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you through a storm you could not survive alone, all you can do is worship.

Remember: faith like a mustard seed.

Key Terms

Term	Plain meaning	Where it appears
Parable	A short story from everyday life set beside a spiritual truth to explain it.	Mark 4:30, 33
Kingdom of God	God's rule as King, starting now in the lives of His people and coming in full when Christ returns.	Mark 4:30
Gentiles	People who are not Jewish.	Background
Expository teaching	Reading a passage of Scripture and then explaining what it means.	Mark 4:33-34; Nehemiah 8:8
Stern	The back of the boat, where the steersman usually sat.	Mark 4:38
Rebuke	A sharp command to stop. Jesus uses it on demons and on the wind.	Mark 1:25; Mark 4:39

Where Christians Read This Differently

Christians agree that the mustard seed shows God's kingdom growing from small to great. They differ on a few details.

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- **The birds as the nations:** Most teachers, past and present, read the birds as people from every nation finding shelter in God's kingdom, which matches Ezekiel 17:23 and Daniel 4:12.
- **The birds as trouble:** Some Bible teachers point out that birds in the parable of the sower stand for Satan snatching the Word away (Mark 4:4, 15). They read the large plant as the visible church growing into something bigger than God planned, with harmful influences settling in its branches.
- **How the kingdom grows:** Some Christians expect the gospel to steadily win the world before Christ returns. Others believe the kingdom grows now but comes in full only when Christ returns. Both see the parable as a promise that God's kingdom will not stay small.

My view: The tree is the kingdom and the church, which started small and keeps growing, and the birds are the people who find shelter, safety and fellowship in it through salvation.

Discussion Questions (20-25 minutes)

What does it say?

1. What two things does Jesus compare in verses 30-32? How does Mark describe the plant once it is grown?
2. What did Jesus do while the storm raged (verse 38), and what were the disciples doing?

What does it mean?

3. Why would Jesus pick something as small as a mustard seed to picture God's kingdom?
4. The disciples "feared a great fear" after the storm stopped (verse 41). Why were they more afraid after the miracle than during the storm?
5. What does it tell you about Jesus that He can be tired enough to sleep through a storm and powerful enough to stop it with a word?

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How do I live it?

6. What storm are you in right now? What would it look like to trust that Jesus is in the boat with you?
7. Where have you seen God take something small in your life and grow it?

Takeaway (5 minutes)

This week: God grows big things from small beginnings, and the One in your boat is Lord of the wind and the sea.

Memory verse: "And they feared a great fear, and they were saying to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?'" (Mark 4:41, SLB)

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank You that Your kingdom keeps growing, even when it looks small to us. Grow our faith from a mustard seed into something that gives shelter to others. When the storms come, remind us that You are in the boat, and that the wind and the sea still obey You. In Your name, Amen.

Going Deeper (Optional)

- Matthew 13:31-33: Matthew's version of the mustard seed, paired with the parable of the leaven.
- Mark 6:45-52: Jesus walks on the water to His disciples in another storm.
- Psalm 107:23-32: Sailors cry out to the Lord in a storm and He brings them to safe harbor.
- Jonah 1: Another man asleep in a boat during a storm, with a very different ending.

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- Isaiah 43:1-3: God's promise to be with His people when they pass through the waters.

Leader Notes

Question 3 (why a mustard seed): It was the smallest seed farmers in Galilee planted, and people used it as a picture of something tiny (see Matthew 17:20; Luke 17:6). Jesus is saying His kingdom may start with almost nothing, a carpenter and a handful of fishermen, but it will end up larger than anything around it.

If someone says the mustard seed is not the smallest seed in the world: That is true; orchid seeds are smaller. Jesus was talking to Galilean farmers about seeds they sowed "on the earth" (Mark 4:31), and among those the mustard seed was the smallest. He was using the language of everyday life, not writing a science book.

Question 4 (afraid after the miracle): The SLB keeps the Greek of verse 41 word for word: "they feared a great fear." A storm can kill you, but a Man who commands the storm is something they had never seen. They were face to face with God's own power (Psalm 89:9). That kind of fear is awe, and it leads to the question Mark wants every reader to answer: who is this?

Question 5 (asleep and in control): Jesus is fully man and fully God. He got tired like us (John 4:6; Hebrews 4:15), and He has the authority only God has over creation (Psalm 107:29).

Sources

Every outside fact in this study comes from one of these. Scripture is from the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB) throughout.

- Meaning of parabole: W.E. Vine, Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, vol. 3, p. 158 (paraphrased, not quoted).
- Mustard seed size: "Brassica nigra (PROSEA)," Pl@ntUse, https://plantuse.plantnet.org/en/Brassica_nigra_(PROSEA) (seed about 1 mm across).

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- Sea of Galilee elevation and sudden storms: "Sea of Galilee Geography," That the World May Know, https://www.thattheworldmayknow.com/sea-of-galilee-geography.
- The Greek word phimoo (to muzzle) in Mark 1:25 and Mark 4:39: Blue Letter Bible lexicon, Strong's G5392, https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5392.
- Mark as author: Eusebius, Church History 3.39.15, quoting Papias.

Acronym List

SLB: Steadfast Literal Bible

A.D.: Anno Domini, Latin for "in the year of our Lord"

PROSEA: Plant Resources of South-East Asia, a plant reference database

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