

Jesus Walks on the Water
Matthew 14:22-33
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The account of Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee is found in three of the Gospel records (Matthew 14:22-33; Mark 6:45-52; and John 6:15-21). In each of the three accounts, it follows the story of the feeding of the five thousand. This miracle serves to continue to build the faith of the disciples as they are compelled to trust Him to provide for their needs and to deliver them from a difficult situation. The faith of the disciples will be important as the opposition to Christ grows.

The disciples and crowds are sent (14:22-23)

It is noteworthy that Jesus made the disciples get into the boat to go to the other side of the sea. The action literally means “compelled” and is quite forceful. This could well be to set up the disciples to experience the miracle of walking on water, just as Jesus set up them up for the feeding of the five thousand (cf. John 6:5-6).

In each of Matthew and Mark’s accounts of Jesus sending the disciples off into the boat, Jesus then sends the crowds away. John 6:15 describes a reason why He departed to the mountain to pray, which is related to the crowds, “*So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.*” Going away to the mountain defused the momentum by the crowds to make Him king. This was not only inconsistent with the plan of God for the Messiah, it would also expedite the opposition to Christ.

Since John described Him as withdrawing to the mountain before the disciples got into the boat, it is apparent that Jesus went up to the mountain both before and after His order to the disciples, as Matthew and Mark describe. The mountain was what we could consider a hill. In this part of the coast of the Sea of Galilee, there was a slope from the hill down to the coastline.

Jesus goes up to the mountain the second time to pray. This may also explain why He sent the disciples and the crowds away, for “*when it was evening, He was there alone.*” As the Jew understood it, the evening was the period from the late afternoon to shortly after sunset. Just prior to the feeding of the five thousand, Mark describes Jesus and the disciples withdrawing from the people to rest (Mark 6:31-32), and Jesus may have needed time to pray and prepare Himself for what lay ahead of Him. The continued instruction of the disciples will become paramount.

The disciples got into the boat in the place where the five thousand were fed, which was near the town of Bethsaida, according to Luke 9:10. However, Mark 6:45 appears to describe the other side that Jesus sent them to was also Bethsaida, *“Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side to Bethsaida, while He Himself was sending the crowd away.”* If they were near Bethsaida, why did they get in the boat to go to the other side to Bethsaida?

Further complicating the matter, John 6:17 describes the boat as headed toward Capernaum, not Bethsaida, which was back toward the west of the sea, *“after getting in the boat, they started to cross the sea to Capernaum.”* Some consider the boat headed to the west because the wind was blowing them in the wrong direction, which is a possible solution as we can see from Matthew 14:24, *“But the boat was already a long distance from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary.”* Mark 6:53 says that ultimately the boat arrived at Gennesaret *“when they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret”* (Matthew 14:34; cf. Mark 6:53). Gennesaret was just west of Capernaum, near the sea.

Some consider that this issue can be resolved by considering that “Bethsaida” was a name for more than one town on the Sea of Galilee. The name meant “house for fish,” and since fishing was a main occupation along the sea, this stands to reason that towns in different jurisdictions would have this name. The town near the feeding of the five thousand was named Bethsaida, Bethsaida-Julius, near the sea and east of the Jordan River. This was in the area of Gaulanitis in the tetrarchy of Herod Philip. Thus the town where they were headed was another Bethsaida, called *“Bethsaida of Galilee”* in John 12:21. Philip was from there, as were Peter and Andrew (cf. John 1:44).

The problem with the view that there were two Bethsaidas is that there is no clear record of a Bethsaida to the west of the sea. There are ruins that could have been another Bethsaida and some early Christians thought it was on the western side of the sea, where possibly another Bethsaida could have been. But this is speculative. Bethsaida of Galilee could be the one Bethsaida in the broad region of Galilee.

Statements of geography in the Bible can be general in nature. The feeding of the five thousand was not in a town, but in a desolate place (Mark 6:35). Bethsaida was nearby (cf. Luke 9:10) and Mark 6:35 may be grammatically understood as *through* Bethsaida, rather than *to* Bethsaida. Supporting this is John’s account of them going to Capernaum, where in reality, they went past Capernaum to Gennesaret.

Walking on the sea (14:24-25)

The boat with the disciples was “*a long distance from the land.*” This translates the literal Greek word meaning of “many STADIA.” A “stadia” was about 630 feet, slightly under one-eighth of a mile, or about two football fields long. To be many “stadias” would mean the disciples were likely well over a mile from shore. Mark 6:47 describes them as “*in the middle of the sea.*” John 6:19 will eventually tell us that “*they had rowed about three or four miles*” (literally, 25 or 30 “stadia”) before seeing Jesus walking on the sea. Since the Sea of Galilee is at most five miles wide, we can see they were in the middle of the sea.

They were not only a long distance away from the shore, but the wind was contrary, meaning it was adversely affecting their progress. Obviously, boats had no motors then and were at the mercy of the wind pushing against their efforts to row their boat. Acts 27:4 describes this same problem that faced the ship that Paul was on when he sailed to Rome. This was likely in the early Spring, at the end of the rainy season, when the grass would be green (cf. Mark 6:39). During this time of year, there can often be strong winds from the west.

They faced this circumstance “*in the fourth watch of the night.*” This was based upon the custom of dividing their guard into four segments of three hours each, between 6:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. Therefore, this was around three o’clock in the morning. Being on a boat in the middle of the sea in the dark would not be a concern, since many of the disciples were accustomed to fishing at night. Their challenge was because the sea was “*stirred up because a strong wind was blowing*” (John 6:18).

So after hours of difficult rowing (cf. Mark 6:48) three or four miles against adverse conditions, they saw Jesus walking on the sea. John describes Him coming near to them (cf. John 6:19) and Mark informs us that He was planning to pass by them (cf. Mark 6:48).

The disciples are scared (14:26-27)

Each of the three Gospel accounts describe the reaction of the disciples as being terrified and frightened. Matthew and Mark show their fear exclamation of thinking He was a ghost, using a word from which we derive the English word “phantom” and was associated with magic in literature. Later, when they saw the resurrected Christ, “*they were startled and frightened and thought that they were seeing a spirit*” (Luke 24:37).

The difficulty the disciples faced with fear is frequently addressed by Jesus. *“When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified. And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, ‘Get up, and do not be afraid’”* (Matthew 17:6-7). *“The angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid’”* (Matthew 28:5). *“Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me’”* (Matthew 28:10).

Jesus responded *“immediately”* to their great fear with the same exhortation, *“take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.”* The phrase *“it is I”* is central and takes the form of a chiasm in order to emphasize the person of Christ in the exhortation to take courage and not be fearful. This phrase is literally *“I am,”* which has implications of deity as seen in Matthew 22:32 and also in the many usages from the Gospel of John.

The presence of Christ brings courage and eliminates fear. This is why the Lord’s last words of this Gospel following the Great Commission were, *“I am with you always, even to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:20). This is also why the coming of the Spirit of Christ in the establishment of the Church in Acts 2 is pivotal in the transformation of the disciples from the upper room to proclaiming Christ to the ends of the earth. Jesus is indeed, *“God with us”* (cf. Matthew 1:23).

This unique miracle of walking on the sea would have reminded the Jews of God being the ruler of the sea. *“Who alone stretches out the heavens and tramples down the waves of the sea”* (Job 9:8). *“Thus says the LORD, ‘Who makes a way through the sea and a path through the mighty waters’”* (Isaiah 43:16). Jesus walking on water gives evidence of His Deity, able to overcome nature in divine fashion.

Peter is summoned (14:28-29)

The account of Peter walking on the water is unique to Matthew’s Gospel. The upcoming chapters of Matthew will also highlight Peter’s special role among the twelve disciples (cf. Matthew 16:13-23; 17:24-27). He is the spokesman for the disciples who consider Him to be a ghost. The statement, *“Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water,”* is not a wonderment of whether it is truly Jesus on the water. The word *“if”* is a first class condition, which assumes the statement is true. It could be translated as *“since it is you.”* Peter knew what He saw was Jesus and recognized His power. Peter did not just step out of the boat but requested that Jesus command him to come to Him.

Jesus complies with Peter's request and orders him to "*come!*" Peter responds by walking on the water toward Jesus. Peter should be recognized for doing what would seem to be impossible, getting out of the boat in a strong, dangerous wind and walking on the water. In his choice to walk toward Jesus, Peter becomes the only other person besides the Lord to walk on water.

Peter is sinking (14:30-31)

Peter quickly recognizes the potential peril that the significant wind poses to his safety and becomes frightened. He begins to sink under the force of the waves and cries out for Jesus to save him. This cry echoes Psalm 69:1-2, 14-15, "*Save me, O God, for the waters have threatened my life. I have sunk in deep mire, and there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and a flood overflows me... Deliver me from the mire and do not let me sink; May I be delivered from my foes and from the deep waters. May the flood of water not overflow me nor the deep swallow me up, nor the pit shut its mouth on me.*" Peter's urgent plea is a great example of a basic prayer for all mankind... "*Lord, save me!*"

Jesus responded to Peter's urgent request and "*stretched out His hand and took hold of Him.*" Peter either made substantial progress toward Jesus or Jesus was very near the boat, since Jesus was able to reach out and grab Peter. This act of mercy is followed by words of correction, "*you of little faith, why did you doubt?*" Even though Peter was the only disciple to have faith to begin to walk on the water, it was little faith that was quickly filled with doubt.

Peter is both a positive example of faith and a negative example of doubt. He had sufficient faith to leave the boat and walk to Jesus, but he quickly became distracted by the wind's effect upon the water, creating waves that reminded him of his risk. He responded with a natural, human fear in preservation of his life. Yet this natural response to the dangerous waves was evidence of his little faith. Clearly, natural responses are not necessarily evidence to godliness.

The wind is stilled (14:32-33)

Both Matthew and Mark describe the wind stopping when Jesus and Peter got into the boat. This does not specifically describe Jesus as stilling the sea, but it certainly implies that Jesus was the cause of the sea becoming calm. This implication is not only because of the timing of the sea becoming calm as He entered the boat, but because of the astonishment of the disciples (Mark 6:51) and their worship of Him.

The disciples' exclamation, "*You are certainly God's Son!*" should not be seen as a full theological understanding of Jesus, but part of their growing sense of awareness of His power. This is likely an acknowledgement of Jesus as the Messiah and worthy of worship. It certainly was a development of their thinking as compared to when Jesus rebuked the sea earlier in this Gospel, "*then He got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and it became perfectly calm. The men were amazed, and said, 'What kind of a man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?'*" (Matthew 8:26-27).

Mark omits the description of the worship by the disciples and appears to give a contradictory version of this story, "*then He got into the boat with them, and the wind stopped; and they were utterly astonished, for they had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves, but their heart was hardened*" (Mark 6:51-52). However, this astonishment should be viewed as part of worship of God, as can be seen in Luke 5:26, "*they were all struck with astonishment and began glorifying God.*" Also, this is Mark's summary of the failures of the disciples as a whole, who were represented by Peter in being terrified at seeing Jesus, frightened by the wind and not trusting Jesus who had earlier calmed the sea. Their lack of faith was evidence of the hardness of heart, even though they worshiped Him.

Conclusion

Much has been written about the application to our lives of Peter's faith and doubt in walking on the water. While we can see our own failure to trust the Lord in the midst of difficult trials, we must remember the purpose of this story. Jesus is continuing the work of training His disciples to trust Him in light of the impending crucifixion and their future role in leadership of the church.

This account of Jesus walking on water is primarily about the recognition of the person of Christ and the resultant trust in Him. It is much less an illustration of the trials and tribulations of our life. We must recognize that experiences are wholly different from Peter's circumstance with Jesus. The application for us must be our faith in the greatness of the person and work of Jesus Christ, regardless of the comparison of our trials with this story of Jesus walking on the water. We, like Peter, can trust God to deliver us through any crisis according to the sovereignty of God's will.