

The Calming of the Storm
Matthew 8:23-27
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Matthew 8-9 provides us with the account of ten miracles that serve to prove the authority of Jesus over all. These miracles are structured thematically, rather than chronologically. Matthew 8:23-27 begins the second set of three miracles (8:23-9:8) which serve to prove Christ's authority over all. Matthew has organized these miracles into groups for the purpose of presenting Jesus as the Messiah of Israel.

- Miracles of healing (8:1-17)
- Miracles of power (8:23-9:8)
- Miracles of restoration (9:19-34)

The first group of three miracles all involved physical healing, showing Jesus as having authority of physical ailments. *"This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: 'HE HIMSELF TOOK OUR INFIRMITIES AND CARRIED AWAY OUR DISEASES.'"* (Matthew 8:17). The second set involves Jesus' power, beginning with His power over nature.

Entering the boat (8:23)

The boat that Jesus and His disciples got into was a term that could be used to describe a boat of many different sizes. It was very likely a fishing vessel, as this was a typical boat on the sea in the first century. A first century fishing boat was found buried in the mud of the Sea of Galilee, was twenty-six feet long and was made for a crew of five. There would be room in this boat for several others as well, particularly if there were no fish onboard.

The exact nature of the boat may be uncertain but it must have been able to hold at least Jesus and the twelve disciples. While Matthew places the calling of himself after this miracle (9:9), Luke, who writes more chronologically, places this miracle after the calling of the twelve disciples. So it is safe to say that the boat must have been large enough to hold 13 men, and quite possibly others who also were following Jesus (in light of the two men in Matthew 8:18-22). The disciples who followed Jesus into the boat are set in contrast to the two men who did not follow him.

Engulfed by the storm (8:24)

Storms on the Sea of Galilee were not uncommon. The sudden nature of such storms, and their intensity were experienced due to the geography of the region. The elevation of the Sea is nearly 700 feet below sea level with the land east of the sea considerably higher. As the warm air from the Sea rises in the east, the air from the west fills the void, creating high wind, even without warning.

Yet this storm was certainly unusual. Since at least four of the disciples were fishermen by trade (Peter, Andrew, John and James) and were very familiar with the Sea of Galilee, it is clear that this storm was something unlike what any of them had ever experienced. For such seasoned men to be frightened by the Sea speaks of the dramatic nature of this storm.

Also, Matthew uses a word for the storm that is typically reserved to earthquakes (SEISMOS, cf. 24:2; 27:51; 28:2). This does not mean the waves were the result of an earthquake since wind was specifically mentioned (8:26, 27). The word that Luke uses for the storm communicates a whirlwind (Luke 8:23). There is no doubt of the violent nature of the storm, unlike anything they had seen before.

The storm so engulfed the boat that the waves covered the boat. Luke describes the boat as “swamped.” The danger was such that the boat could either capsize or sink by being filled with too much water.

Remarkably, Jesus was asleep under such circumstances. Various deductions have been offered to explain this, such as extreme weariness, trust in God’s protection, confidence that His death was not imminent, and the Old Testament texts that speak of God as asleep and forgetting Israel during times of trial (Psalm 35:23; 44:23-24; 59:4; Isaiah 51:9). Regardless, the focus of this narrative is not upon Jesus being asleep but what Jesus does when He is awake.

Fearful disciples (8:25)

The disciples are convinced that they are about to drown. They were more than aware of the dangers of capsizing in the midst of a violent storm. Their exclamation “*we are perishing!*” describes their evaluation of their present state. There is no question about their dire circumstances.

What is intriguing is their plea to Jesus to save them. They seem to not expect Jesus to stop the storm, since when He does so, they are amazed (8:27).

Another indication that they do not expect Him to stop the storm was their fear, which Jesus rebuked (8:26). If they expected Jesus to end the storm they may not have been so frantic.

Yet if we look at this from the standpoint of their humanity, we certainly can sympathize with their alarm. But why would several seasoned commercial fishermen plead with a carpenter to rescue them at sea? Clearly, they do not expect Him to navigate the boat toward safety.

The best perspective of why they are beseeching Jesus to save them is that this really isn't a plea for deliverance but more of an exclamation regarding the danger and a plea for Jesus to join with them in preserving the boat. The water was filling the boat making it increasingly unstable and they were in great danger of drowning and needed everyone working to bail the water out of the boat.

The phrase "Lord save us" is recorded as simply "Lord save" in some of the oldest Greek texts and earliest translations. It is unlikely that the word "us" would be dropped by copyists, but more likely it was added by later scribes.

Luke's wording of the disciples' exclamation is "*Master, Master we are perishing!*" (Luke 8:24). This helps us understand Matthew's "*Lord save*" as urgently informing Jesus of their great peril. They needed help and they viewed Him as their authority figure and this is a natural response by desperate people who are in fear for their lives.

The phrase "Lord save us" has been lifted from this text and placed into types of church liturgy. The sense of eternal salvation is completely absent from this text, for it is all about the fear of physical demise. This is therefore a phrase from a physical deliverance and not a theological statement of spiritual deliverance. This is one more way people can take words out of context.

Rebuking the disciples (8:26)

Jesus' response to them does not address their perceived need, but rather their actual need. The disciples were concerned about their physical lives but Jesus was concerned about their spiritual lives. He does not rebuke them for either waking Him or for desire for deliverance, but rather for their lack of faith as manifested by their overwhelming fear. His rhetorical question about being afraid sets up His instructional rebuke.

This is not the last time when Jesus will rebuke their lack of faith. Jesus rebukes Peter's lack of faith when He walked on water (Matthew 14:31), He rebuked the disciples' lack of faith after the feeding of the four thousand (Matthew 16:8), and He rebuked the disciples' lack of faith in their failure to drive out the demon (Matthew 17:20). Lack of faith was a point of teaching for Jesus.

Why would Jesus rebuke His disciples for lacking faith when their response was a completely understandable expression of lack of safety? Certainly God has placed a natural sense of self-preservation within mankind. Yet this incident describes the importance of the supernatural over the natural.

We in our weakness are fearful for our life, but the Lord taught us to not be worried for our life.

"For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?...But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things." (Matthew 6:25, 30-32).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught His disciples to not be worried about life because God knows what is needed. He describes those who worry about their life as "*you of little faith*" (Matthew 6:30). The lack of faith that God knows our need and is able to provide for us why the disciples were fearful and why Jesus rebuked their lack of faith.

Mark's Gospel describes the words of Jesus as an even stronger reference to their lack of faith, "*How is it that you have no faith?*" (Mark 4:40). They were afraid because they did not have faith. If the disciples possessed faith, they would have trusted that God cared for them in the midst of their dire circumstances.

The lack of faith of the disciples was not so much a complete absence of faith since they did have faith to follow Jesus to this point. It more addressed the limitation of their faith. Their faith in Jesus led them to follow Him, but not of a quality that would allow them to trust God in these more dramatic situations.

Faith requires knowledge (cf. Romans 10:17). The disciples could have realized that if Jesus was the Messiah, and if the Messiah would die for the sins of the world by means of crucifixion according to Isaiah 53:5 (“*But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed*”), then they could have had faith that they would not perish in this storm. Truly His hour had not yet come (cf. John 7:30, 8:20).

The issue is not only about their faith but about their fear. They feared because they lacked faith and their lack of faith produced fear. When we do not trust God in a full sense, we will be tempted to worry about the future and in times of stress, our anxiety will turn into fearfulness. Fear will be remedied by faith in God. When we embrace the truths that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving, we will not be afraid but we will have faith. “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love” (1 John 4:18).

Calming the sea (8:26)

Jesus arose after His correction of the disciples and “*rebuked the winds and the sea.*” The phrasing of Jesus’ rebuke is noteworthy as He personifies the elements of nature. This phrasing is also similar to how Jesus speaks in the context of casting out a demon in Matthew 17:18.

It is helpful to consider why the earth has storms in the first place. When God created the earth, there was no rain (Genesis 2:5). The advent of storms was the result of the fall of man. Storms are one more manifestation of the fallenness of the world and thus explain the rebuke of Jesus to the wind and the sea. Jesus restored the earth to a tranquility that God originally designed. In reality, this is another glimpse of Jesus overcoming the effects of evil.

When Jesus spoke the winds became calm. This sudden change from violent wind to calm wind was a remarkable event that marks their deliverance from the storm. The winds are described as “perfectly calm,” not just diminished in strength. The miraculous work of Jesus truly saved them from perishing.

Yet it is more striking that the sea became calm too. For the wind to suddenly become calm was shockingly dramatic and eliminated the threat to their lives, but the calming of the sea is even more supernatural.

It is physically impossible for a great movement of water to become quickly calm. The momentum of the water would continue to dissipate unless the Lord specifically caused the sea to be calm too. The clarification that the sea became perfectly calm further demonstrated the authority that Jesus possessed over nature.

Amazement of the men (8:27)

The disciples are amazed by Jesus' power to calm the powerful storm. Amazement of people is a theme in this section. Leading into this section we saw the crowds responding with amazement at Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount as one having authority (Matthew 7:28-29) and we will see the crowds amazed at His healing power (Matthew 9:8, 33; 12:23). There is no doubt that the public display of the power of Jesus left people who witnessed His works in shock.

The exclamation "*What kind of a man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?*" is the essence of the gospel of Matthew. Jesus would later ask the disciples, "*Who do you say that I am?*" to which Peter rightly replied, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*" (Matthew 16:15-16). This is Matthew's central point, that Jesus is the Messiah, the King of the Jews.

Matthew also highlighted that as the King, Jesus would rule over the kingdom. The authority that Jesus demonstrated over the wind and the sea is part of the subduing of the earth. This is a partial fulfillment of the mandate of God to man in Genesis 1:28, "*Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it.*"

In the kingdom of God, there is evidence of blessing on the earth. Christ will rule the world and deliver us to a time of peace (Ezekiel 23:25).

- This extends to the government – "*And the LORD will be king over all the earth*" (Zechariah 14:9).
- This extends to the animals – "*And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, And the leopard will lie down with the young goat, And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together*" (Isaiah 11:6).
- This extends to the vegetation – "*And I will cause showers to come down in their season; they will be showers of blessing. Also the tree of the field will yield its fruit and the earth will yield its increase*" (Ezekiel 34:26-27).

- This extends to the effects of a fallen world upon the lives of people – *“And there will no longer be heard in her The voice of weeping and the sound of crying. No longer will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, Or an old man who does not live out his days; For the youth will die at the age of one hundred And the one who does not reach the age of one hundred Will be thought accursed”* (Isaiah 65:19-20).

The present fear of perishing can be overcome emotionally by faith in God who is able to rescue us. The ultimate fear of perishing is overcome by our full confidence in our salvation and the hope of eternal life. The One who can calm the storm is the One that we can place our full trust in, for both this present life as well as the life to come for He alone has authority over all. *“Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth””* (Matthew 28:18).

Conclusion

This miracle of the calming of the storm depicts the authority of Jesus as never before revealed. He had delivered people from bodily illness but now He delivers them from the perils of nature in dramatic fashion. This leads to the singular conclusion that Jesus is the Son of God.

In His divinity, He overcame the evil result of natural calamities, yet in His humanity He slept in the boat. As fully man, He suffered the consequences of evil, ultimately leading to His death on the cross, but as fully God, He was able to overcome the consequences of evil, in this case by calming the storm.

His power was such that He could have delivered Himself from all evil just as He did with this storm. Christ willingly went to the cross to suffer for the sins of the world. *“Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? How then will the Scriptures be fulfilled, which say that it must happen this way?”* (Matthew 26:53-54).

If the disciples were amazed at His power to control the wind and the sea, how much more should we be amazed at His power to control Himself to willingly choose death on the cross? This is what Jesus meant when He said, *“I am among you as the one who serves”* (Luke 22:27). We must never cease to be amazed at the greatness of our Lord Jesus Christ for all His blessings, from the least of them to the greatest of them.