

Introduction

The best way to move forward from Matthew 14.21 where we left off last week is to work our way to the end of the chapter (22-36), even though verses 34-36 seem a bit disconnected in the narrative. However, the unity of the material stems from two things. 1) First, the narrative unites around travel by boat on the Sea of Galilee (boarding the boat, v. 22, in the boat, v. 33, and leaving the boat at Gennesaret, v. 36). 2) Second, the account unites under the purpose of showing the expansion of Jesus' ministry after the death of John the Baptist. This expansion involved the spreading of our Lord's fame to such a degree that it finally reached the court of the Roman ruler, Herod (son of Herod the great who tried to kill Jesus as an infant). From an indefinite point in history when news reached the king, Matthew flashes back to the death of John and moves forward from his death citing the kind of miracles that Jesus went on to perform that spread His fame to a new level. Here in this chapter we have record of Jesus healing the sick, feeding more than five thousand people, walking on the lake, and "making well" many in and around the city of Gennesaret (roughly located in the north west corner of the Sea of Galilee).

For our focus today, let me direct your thoughts to the main event in this chapter, to Jesus in the midst of the storm. My title is "Looking to Jesus in the Midst of the Storm." If you think about it for a minute, there are two distinct ideas here. There is the focus of the text on Jesus in the storm, and there is our duty to focus on Him in the storm. Notably, on one hand, we have Jesus in the midst of the storm, and on the other, we find ourselves in the midst of the storm. Moreover, there is inseparability between Jesus and us in the storms of life. Presently, some of us in our little flock are in the midst of stormy waters and the rest of us are in it too, but more on the edge of it. Nonetheless, it is a difficult time for all of us since the death of our brother Dave. We do not sorrow as those who have no hope, but we do sorrow, and we have many adjustments to make. In times like these, we need the Savior in a special way, we need an anchor, and we thus we need to focus on Jesus and us in the midst of the storm.

So today let us go to this text to consider two main points: 1) Jesus, the storm, and the disciples, and 2) Jesus, the storm, and Peter. Then we can apply the text to our context today; some applications will simply leap from the text before we get to the conclusion.

1A. Jesus, the storm, and the disciples (22-27)

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. 23 After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. 25 During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. 26 When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. 27 But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

1B. Jesus made them get into the boat and set out across the lake (Matt. 14:22).

In other words, *He sent them out into the storm* (Matt. 14:24) while He went up on a mountain to be alone and pray (23a). We have to connect verse 22 with what follows; it conditions our thoughts about the storm on the sea. He insists against our resistance that our journeys include trials of our faith, even the refiner's fire. He designs it "our dross to consume and our gold to refine."

2B. He sought solitude and prayer.

He sent them out into the storm (Matt. 14:24) *while He went up on a mountain to be alone and pray* (23a). What is involved in this solitude? Two things come together when Jesus steps away from the crowds to pray alone.

1) One is communion with the Father with regard to the implications of the death of John the Baptist. When Jesus was told that John had been killed (beheaded by Herod, 14:10-12), He sought this solitude but was interrupted by the crowds (and concern for them led to the feeding of the five thousand). The interruption derives from the fact that He went by boat to be alone but when He arrived and went ashore, the crowd was already there (14:13-14a). He had compassion on them, healed the sick, and fed the five thousand (14b-21).

2) But the fact that in this context He sent the disciples out into the stormy sea indicates that there is some connection between the death of John and this plight of the disciples.

Moreover, this indicates also that His communion with the Father in response to John's death was forward looking. The death of John turns the thoughts of Christ toward the disciples and to prayer on their behalf as He sends them into the storm.

John's death marked the end of the forerunner's work. Now the pathway on which Jesus is to walk is straight. The people want to make Him a king (Jn. 6:15). However, for Jesus it is time to take the training of His disciples to a new level. The kingdom of God is manifesting itself and Jesus is the king but His kingship is oriented to the disciples and their training. He secures His kingdom as a Sower going forth to sow, by wheat and tares, by bringing the gospel to the nations instead of judgment. For this, the disciples are in need of training. This training involves testing. Therefore, He sent them into the storm.

3B. So next we see Jesus alone in prayer and the disciples alone in the storm.

Matthew states the contrast between where Jesus was and where He sent the disciples. He was alone on a mountain and they were out on the sea (far from land) in a boat beaten by the waves with the wind against them (14:23b with 24). Of course, neither is actually alone. Jesus is with the Father on the hillside. Moreover, the Father is with the disciples on the boat.

4B. Then in the middle of the night Jesus went out to them on the sea (14:25-27).

According to Mark, Jesus went to them "walking on the sea" (6:48b, Matt. 14:25) in the context of seeing them "making headway painfully" (6:48a).

Surprisingly, or should we say "not surprisingly," when Jesus came to their aid, He initially made matters worse by terrifying them (Matt. 14:26). They were terrified and said "It is a ghost," and "they cried out in fear." It is interesting to hear the superstitious comment that hints of how far the disciples have yet to go in their preparation for apostolic service.

Nevertheless, Jesus comforted them saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid" (14:27). These are extremely comforting words to hear from our Savior. They warm us when we shiver in the cold winds that beat upon us. They quench our thirst for a sense of safety, security, and well-being.

Mark and John end the narrative at this comforting point with the following comments on the responses of the disciples: *they gladly received him* into the boat (Jn. 6:21), and they were *utterly astonished* (Mk. 6:51). Here in Matthew, the account ends with *worship* and *praise* filled acknowledgement (14:32-33).

This heart attitude is central to the work the disciples will do as apostles who will take the gospel bread from Jesus and pass it on to the crowds, the multitudes, and the nations in the building of the church (cf. 14:19, feeding the multitudes is an enacted parable about the gospel).

2A. Jesus, the storm, and Peter (28-33)

28 "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." 29 "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" 31 Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" 32 And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. 33 Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God" (Matt. 14:22-33).

1B. Peter's response

In contrast to the other Gospels, Matthew fills out the story as to what happened *before* Jesus entered the boat. He records Peter's response to the Lord's comforting words (14:28-31).

Although, commentators debate over what is driving Peter in this desire to walk on the sea with Christ, no one disagrees about his impulsiveness (one who tends to leap before he looks and ends up eating a lot of crow). How much of Peter is in us all. As they say, "Peter is every Christian." He represents us all and we should thank God that He does. We learn lessons from Peter, especially, the lesson of fumbling and stumbling before a gracious Lord.

At bottom, Jesus is training, schooling, nurturing, and strengthening Peter in the faith. He represents the disciples and with them all disciples in the time between. Therefore, we might well ask, how does this text indicate the reality of his faith?

a) To say, "If it is you" is not an "if" of doubt. It is saying, if it is you then that is all I need to know. If you are here with me in the storm and on the water then I want to be with you.

b) By waiting on Jesus' consent, he indicates his dependence. He cannot step out into the troubled sea without the command of Christ. I would say that those are the words of a man of faith.

c) Stating a willingness to follow Christ logically and consistently despite the unusual setting shows his faith. Thus, he says, "Tell me to come and I will do so."

d) Then he in fact stepped out of the boat and walked on the water. This showed the consistency of Peter's faith. It is one thing to reason based on faith and it is another to put your money where your mouth is. This is a challenge to move from theory that is logically consistent to consistency in application. Peter is a man of reasoned faith, of consistent active faith.

e) He showed the ultimate character of his faith when push came to shove and he began to sink. "Lord, save me." He knows to whom to address his distress and what to say!

2B. The response of Jesus to Peter

He acts in deliverance. He reached out His hand and caught him.

Then He speaks (v. 31, why did you doubt?).

We often hear that we should not ask the "why?" question. There are points when we must end all searching and say, "It is the Lord's will and I do not know why." That is very true.

However, the Lord Jesus encourages us to ask the "why?" question. He encourages us to *ask it about our conduct and about our faith*. It is the case for us as it was for Peter: the Lord inquires as to why we doubt ("O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"). We can ask three questions in light of this "why."

1) Is the question of doubt due to the *littleness* of faith? That does not seem to be the case for that would be like giving the answer in the very process of asking the question: do you have little faith because your faith is little? It seems better to hear the Lord's question in a way that affirms the little faith and that suggests that it is sufficient for the task God calls us to do. Given that it is sufficient, why do you doubt? This has the effect of affirming the little faith that we have indicating that though it may be small it is nonetheless sufficient. Being little speaks of the need for growth and development but that is quite different from being utterly deficient.

2) How is little more? How can that which is small be great? It just takes a little faith to remove mountains. How can that be? It is not due to something intrinsic to faith. That is the point. Faith is something little *per se* (in and of itself) and those who have it are sinners that know right well how weak they truly are. Sometimes we may forget the fact of our weaknesses but the trials of life have a way of reminding us repeatedly of them, and of how much we need Christ.

So it is a given that Peter is a man of faith. He is a man on the way, a much-unfinished diamond in the rough. However, he is a diamond that is being shaped and chiseled. He may be a hard nut to crack but that hard exterior surrounds a soft believing heart within.

3) Where does the question take us then? Why did Peter doubt given that he was a man of faith? It takes us out there in the storm with Peter and with the Lord Jesus. It takes us out on the water with our eyes on the Lord, with hearts clinging to Him as our prophet, priest, and king.

Now we see clearly why little faith moves mountains and how those who have little faith are great, even greater than John the Baptist, the greatest ever born at the time that Jesus spoke about him. The greatness of a little faith is in the object of that faith.

Conclusion

The fact that little faith is great because of its object is the important lesson here for us. We can apply this lesson in at least four interrelated ways.

1) Peter's problem was not the smallness of his faith nor was his problem his weakness. *His problem was the failure to fix his eyes on Jesus.* Now we see a particularizing of the training of the twelve in the training of Peter; they must take the bread for the nations from the hands of Christ; they must keep their focus ever on Him seeking His blessing of the bread to satisfy sinners in a famine for righteousness and truth.

2) Jesus is showing Peter, the disciples, and all of us who are disciples today that we are safe in His hands because He is invulnerable. In all that threatens to overwhelm us as we serve the Lord Jesus, we are ever safe and secure. Per Psalm 93, none other embraces us than the Lord God who, robed in majesty, reigns from His throne. He is mightier than the thunders of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea. His decrees are very trustworthy and holiness befits His house forevermore.

3) Like Peter, we lose our grip on life when we look too hard and long on the stormy seas. There we will surely sink in the overwhelming trials that come upon us suddenly at times like a sudden storm on the Sea of Galilee. We are no match for the storms when we concentrate on them. We might ask about the death of the Baptist: why was it at this time, why did it come about in this sudden and dishonoring way? We might ask it about the death of our brother Dave: why him, why now, why in this sudden way? Our answer has to be, it is due to the sovereignty of God that is good and gracious though often inexplicable in our eyes. We all have much to learn about God's sovereignty, but one thing jumps off the pages of this text, and that is the awesome fact that Jesus is sovereign God the Son. His will is happening in redemptive history and in the difficulties, in them and through them; right here, we have to come to the bottom line of worship and praise. Then we must learn all the specific lessons as quickly as possible in order to serve Him wholeheartedly. Humble submission is the way forward on our pilgrim journey. In the end, we cannot keep fixing our eyes on the troubles swirling around us.

4) Remember Jesus *in the midst of the storms*. Look at Him *there* noting that He is there as risen Lord, betrayed, crucified, but risen. We read from this side of the resurrection!

In the midst of the storms, you must look *to* Him. Look at *Him* there *with you* in the stormy times. Your rock of foundation, your shield, your strength, your comfort, hope, consolation, and encouragement is the Lord Jesus.

We are strong indeed, when we look away from ourselves (our sins and our trials), and to Him. We find hope, peace, stability, and a spring for our footsteps by fixing our eyes on Jesus the author and finisher of our faith. We must turn away from ourselves, our earthly things, and our difficulties in order to turn to the Lord Jesus to praise Him and serve Him come what may.

Let us fall down before the majesty of the Lord Jesus and speak these words to Him because He is "...robed in majesty; the LORD is robed; he has put on strength as his belt. Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved. ² Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting. ³ The floods have lifted up, O LORD, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring. ⁴ Mightier than the thunders of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea, the LORD on high is mighty! ⁵ Your decrees are very trustworthy; holiness befits your house, O LORD, forevermore" (Ps 93).