

BIBLE BACKGROUND

Matthew 14:22-33

Verses 22-24

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side while he dismissed the crowd. After he sent the crowd away, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When it was evening, he was there alone. The boat was already many kilometres from the land but buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

The next event after the feeding of the 5,000 is introduced by these three verses. Jesus was in command of what was about to happen. **He compelled** ἠνάγκασεν **the disciples to get into the boat**, suggests that the disciples may have resisted. Understandably, they would have wondered how Jesus was going to meet them and where he was going to stay that night. They were not going to return where they left that morning, on the other side of the lake, near Capernaum but Gennesaret to the west (34). Yet, Jesus made it clear they were **going ahead** προάγειν **of him**, that is, he would follow.

Jesus could have asked the disciples to wait by the shore or even suggest spending the night out in the open there but the text is explicit: **he went up the mountain by himself to pray**. There were to be no interruptions, therefore, the disciples had to leave. **When it was evening, he was there alone**, which is obvious but included here to make Jesus' intention emphatic: **he was there alone** μόνος. Jesus intended to be in uninterrupted prayer away from the roads around the lake, high up in **the mountain**. **Prayer** was the source of Jesus' power, trust and direction. Major decisions and the direction of his ministry came from his communion in prayer with his Father (assumed in 14:1-11; 26:36). Jesus sought his Father before major events in his ministry, before his ministry began, before his arrest, before choosing the apostles (Lk 6:12), and before his transfiguration (9:29).

Meanwhile, the disciples had made some headway, **already many kilometres from the land**, before the wind picked up and **the waves were battering and buffeting the boat**. The early gospel tradition has in mind two events that occurred on the lake; the stilling of the storm and the walking on the water. Some of the details leaked from one account into the other (8:24), though it is quite possible that conditions were exactly as describe here.

Verses 25-27

At the fourth watch of the night he came to them walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, screaming out of fear, saying, "It is a ghost". Immediately Jesus spoke to them saying, "Take heart, it is I. Don't be afraid."

According to Roman reckoning, the night was divided into four three-hour **watches**, beginning at 6:00pm, unlike the Jews who had three watches beginning at sunset and ending at sun rise, the middle watch being from 10:00pm to 2:00am. Sometime after 3:00am, **Jesus came to them walking on the lake**, literally, the sea for the lake was called the Sea of Galilee. The disciples progress in the boat had stalled and Jesus could catch them up at a walking pace. When he dismissed the disciples at the lake shore, Jesus must have had this miracle in mind.

Matthew records the reaction of the disciples: **they were terrified, screaming out of fear**. It was dark, the men were exhausted and deprived of sleep and the wind had strained their nerves. Then, out of the darkness they saw a person approaching them. Their terror was understandable for in addition to the frightening appearance of a person, **he was walking on the surface of the lake**. This was no ordinary person in their eyes but **a ghost!** They could have said that the person was an angel. Either way, the person was not of this world and they may have indeed thought that as it approached them, it meant them harm. We also have to allow for superstitious thinking and fear of phenomena that they had no understanding of. When Jesus appeared to his disciples after he rose, they reacted in a similar way (Lk 26:37).

Jesus reacted **immediately** to allay their terror: **Take heart** φαρσείτε, **it is I. Don't be afraid.** Jesus was restoring their courage by assuring them that it was he. The Lord was not a God of terror but of comfort; however, this would not preclude an invitation and challenge to trust and overcome fear. The feeding of the 5,000 was preceded with an invitation to trust him and meet the crowd's need (16). Rather than simply identifying himself, Jesus emphatically pointed to his presence, **it is I** or **I am here** ἐγώ εἰμι, and by doing so, was offering himself to his friends as the antidote to fear and hesitation.

Verses 28-

Peter answered, "If it is you Lord, tell me to come to you on the water." He replied, "Come!" Peter then got out of the boat, walked on the water and went over to Jesus but when he began looking at the wind, he was afraid and began to sink. He called out, "Lord, save me!" At that moment Jesus threw out his hand and took hold of him. He said to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they climbed into the boat the wind ceased. Those in the boat fell to their knees before him exclaiming, "Truly, you are the Son of God."

Ever the impulsive one, Peter was willing to dare the possibility of drowning to be reassured of Jesus' identity. He was almost sure but a positive answer to his question would put it beyond doubt. Peter, though weak, did indeed trust in Jesus and revered him as his Lord. **Tell me come**, literally translates as **command me to come** and is Peter's acknowledgment that the Lord's authority over the lake's surface was the only way he would be able to get to him. Because of that trust in Jesus, Peter was able **to get out the boat and walk on the water to Jesus.**

Though no one can see wind, it can certainly be felt and that is what is meant here when Matthew states: **but when he began looking at the wind.** Peter looked down at the waves, the white caps and the plunging of the water, caused by the wind and his faith disappeared. When his trust sank, his fear rose: **he was afraid and began to sink.** Matthew's emphasizes faith as the trust in Jesus or God the Father that enables action or the miraculous to happen. The previous episode when Jesus invited and challenged the disciple to give the crowd something to eat is evidence of this (cf. 6:33; 7:7-9; 9:22, 29 et al). When Peter took his eyes off Jesus, his sight, his perceptions of the things around him and his ideas about them, he could no longer believe sufficiently to remain on top of the lake. The human response to the world and to the situations of life are exactly that; human observation and not God's view of things.

Peter still had faith though he was weak in his faith. It moved him to call out, **Lord, save me!** Faith that uses God like this is true faith. Luther's explanation to the second commandment makes this clear. Peter considered Jesus to be the Lord (16:16) and naturally called on him to save him. Besides, Christ was there before him, evidently managing to remain on the top of the waves as though the water was firm ground and was someone who could hold him up. When Peter's fear returned and he was going to drown, **Jesus extended his hand immediately to pull him out** of the water. Jesus response was immediate. Peter's failure, though soon to be rebuked, was not held against him. He experimented and tried to do something but couldn't achieve what he wanted in the end. But the Lord was not finished with him.

You of little faith, why did you doubt was a searching question. It was a rhetorical one and no answer was expected. Jesus had pointed out to him what had gone wrong. Little faith and doubt would hold Peter and later generations of Christians back from experience the fulness of victory they could have in Jesus (21:21,22). Faith in Christ opens the door to the full authority of God bestowed on his Son (10:1; 28:18,19). Jesus' power over nature was not merely a miraculous, supernatural force. It was a victory over a rebellious natural world including sickness and death culminating in his death and particularly his resurrection from the tomb.

This is what we can conclude from the final verse: **When they climbed into the boat the wind ceased. Those in the boat fell to their knees before him exclaiming, "Truly, you are the Son of God."** It would be tempting to assert that Jesus merely walked on the water as an act of

convenience. Rather, it was a statement that all the forces of nature can be used by him as God to serve his kingdom. God's kingdom displayed in the presence of Christ consists of humanity restored to him and of nature functioning in such a way that it serves human beings and their flourishing. Hence **the wind ceased when Peter and Jesus climbed into the boat**. It was a moment of paradise. The closing moment in the boat is a vision of heaven: earth is at peace, people fall to their knees worshipping and confessing: **Truly, you are the Son of God** (11:27; 16:16). The reader is to understand that these were moments of revelation and enlightenment. By and large, the disciples struggled to appreciate Jesus' true identity.