

Matthew 14:22-33

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As night falls Jesus sends His disciples in a boat to the other side of the lake (Galilee) while He remains behind to pray. A fierce storm arises and strands the boat out on the sea for hours. As the disciples struggle to navigate their boat to shore Jesus appears walking on the water. The disciples are terrified, mistaking Him for a ghost until He identifies Himself. Peter then calls out to Jesus, and Jesus bids him to walk to Him on the water. Peter does until he doubts. Jesus saves Peter and calms the storm.

The parallel gospel accounts of this event are found in Mark 6:45-52 and John 6:15-21.

Once everyone was finished eating, *Jesus immediately made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side* of the lake. The expression, *the other side*, was a Galilean idiom meaning “the other shore” or “to cross the border” into another province . There were three provinces lining the Sea of Galilee: the province of Galilee surrounded the entire eastern half of *the sea* north to south; Gaulanitis bordered its northeastern shore; and the Decapolis, its southeastern shore.

Mark reports that *the disciples* were headed to the fishing village of Bethsaida, on the northeastern shore bordering the provinces of Gaulantis and Galilee when they went *to the other side* (Mark 6:45). Writing for a Greek audience John names the larger and more recognizable city of Capernaum just to the east of Bethsaida in Galilee as their destination (John 6:17). These things taken into account suggest that *Jesus* performed the miracle of feeding the five thousand in Gaulanitis along the northeastern shore of the *sea*.

Jesus stayed behind and *sent the remaining crowds* back to their homes. *After He* had done so, *Jesus went up on the mountain by Himself*, as *He* had intended to do earlier, in order *to pray*. *Jesus was there alone*. The evening was already dark *when He* finally had the moment of solitude that He sought with His Father after the death of John the Baptist (John 6:17). Against the dark skies, Herod’s palace in the town of Tiberias would have been an ominous beacon across *the sea*.

By the time *Jesus* had finished praying *alone the boat was already a long distance from the land*. And a terrible night storm had come up. Its *waves battered* the small vessel and its *contrary winds* kept it from making it to the safety of the shore. Mark adds the harrowing details that “the boat was in the middle of *the sea*” (Mark 6:47) with *the disciples* “straining at the oars” (Mark 6:48).

Several of *the disciples* were professional fishermen. John, who was one of those fishermen, specifies that they were three or four miles [out]” (John 6:19). The fact that even these experienced fishermen could not navigate their *boat* in the storm indicates the severity and danger of its winds and *waves*. The Sea of Galilee is about thirteen miles

long and eight miles wide, so if they were in the middle of the lake, they were many miles from shore.

Matthew and Mark emphasize that *Jesus came to them during the fourth watch of the night* (Matthew 14:25; Mark 6:48). *The fourth watch* was the final designated time for the *night watch* where watchmen stood guard. It was the hours between 3:00 and 6:00am. Assuming the disciples left Jesus at around 9:00pm, the disciples would have been struggling for nearly six hours or more. They would have been physically and mentally exhausted by now. *The fourth watch* also has significance in Jewish history because it was during these hours that Pharaoh finally released the Israelites from bondage (Exodus 12:29-41). And it was the hour that God opened *the sea* for Israel's deliverance (Exodus 12:14-27).

During this same hour, *Jesus came to His disciples, miraculously walking on the sea*. Interestingly, Mark added that "*He intended to pass them by*" (Mark 6:48). Perhaps *He* was testing their faith. *The disciples were terrified*, thinking that *Jesus was a ghost when they saw Him walking on the sea. They cried in fear* at this startling and ghastly sight. *But Jesus immediately spoke to them. He identified Himself and told them not to fear. "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid."*

Unsure of what they were witnessing, *Peter*, the most outspoken of *the disciples*, shouted back to the figure *walking on the stormy water*. "*Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.*" *Jesus* responded "*Come!*" *Peter* believed that it was *Jesus* and he trusted his *Lord*. Initially, *Peter* showed bold *faith* and *he got out of the boat, and he too walked on the water as he came toward Jesus*. It was *God's* power, not *Peter's* faith that enabled him to *walk on the water*, but *God* rewarded *Peter's* faith in His *Son* by giving *him* this opportunity.

But as *Peter walked on the waves* his focus turned from *Jesus* to the storm. The reality of the storm *frightened him*. *Seeing* the ferocious *wind* *Peter* doubted. *He* forgot the greater reality and power of *Jesus*, and *he* fell into the raging *sea*. *Peter* was plunged up and down in the turbulent *water* and was *beginning to sink* and drown. In desperation, *Peter* cried out, "*Lord save me!*"

In that instant *Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of Peter*. *He* had saved *him* from a watery death. Having nearly drown, now safe *on top of the water*, with the storm raging around them, *Peter* must have been awestruck in the secure grasp of *Jesus*. In that moment *Jesus* rhetorically asked *Peter* a powerful question. "*You of little faith, why did you doubt?*" This was not a stern rebuke. It was an encouraging reassurance. *Peter* could always trust *Jesus*. The Greek term for *you of little faith* is a single word: "Oligopisté." It is a playful nickname, like a father would use for his very young child. Literally, it means "*little-faith*." Like a toddler who falls down and needs to be lifted up by his father, *Peter* was a toddler in the *faith*, and needed to be lifted up when *he* fell.

When they got into the boat, the wind suddenly stopped. The storm was over. *The disciples in the boat* were as amazed as they were relieved. *They worshipped Jesus*. *They*

were saying “*You are certainly God’s Son!*” Indeed *He* was. *Jesus* had shown, perhaps more demonstrably than ever before, His complete authority over nature. In the past few hours, *He* had miraculously fed thousands of hungry people. *He* had *walked on water* and tamed *the wind*. It is worth noting that the Bible considers worship to be an act of recognizing and acknowledging the reality of what is real and true. It was true that *Jesus* is *God’s Son*. And *Jesus* was not a ghost, *He* was real.

Not to be overlooked is another miracle. John testifies that as soon as *Jesus* got into *the boat*, *they* were “immediately at *the land* to which *they* were going” (John 6:21). Apparently, *Jesus* teleported *them* to their destination the instant *He* calmed the storm.

Biblical Text

Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away. After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone. But the boat was already a long distance from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary. And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.” Peter said to Him, “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.” And He said, “Come!” And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” When they got into the boat, the wind stopped. And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, “You are certainly God’s Son!”