

Why Do You Doubt?

Bible Background • MATTHEW 14:22–33

Printed Text • MATTHEW 14:22–33 | Devotional Reading • ISAIAH 38:16–20

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will RECALL the amazing story of the storm at sea followed by Jesus' appearance walking on the water, REPENT of failing to trust in God when caught up in a crisis, and DEVELOP habits of trust that enable us to overcome our doubt about God's care.

In Focus

Two years had passed and Warren was finally able to find a full-time job that fit his training. He took a job that called for a considerable pay cut. So his family could simply stay afloat, he and his wife Angela had to downsize their lifestyle, which included significant cuts in giving. Warren became more and more frustrated and even angry with God.

A visiting preacher at their church brought a powerful word that encouraged them to trust God for their provision. Warren cried out to the Lord and asked for God's intervention. He knew that this current job was not paying the bills, but he decided to work as hard as he could, expecting God to provide for his family's needs.

In the following weeks, Warren and Angela began to receive several unexpected blessings. One night, they were both too weary to make dinner, but then a neighbor came over to offer them the overflow from a casserole. A friend got back in touch with Angela and returned a loan she had given. But then the biggest blessing came.

While at work, Warren gave excellent service to a frazzled customer. It turned out that the customer was the head of human resources at a company that was expanding. He loved Warren's personality and pursuit of excellence, and he gave Warren his card. Within two weeks, Warren had a job that paid more than his previous job. As he walked into his new workplace, he heard in his spirit, "Why did you doubt My ability to bless you?"

How many times do we doubt the Lord's ability to do the impossible in our lives?

Keep in Mind

"Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him. 'You have so little faith,' Jesus said. 'Why did you doubt me?'" (Matthew 14:31, NLT)

Words You Should Know

A. Spirit (Matthew 14:26) phantasma (Gk.) — A phantom or ghost

B. Fear (v. 26) phobos (Gk.) — Dread, terror, especially that which is caused by intimidation or adversaries

Say It Correctly

Gennesaret. juh-NES-uh-ret.

Galilee. GAH-luh-lee.

KJV

Matthew 14:22 And straightway Jesus constrained his disciples to get into a ship, and to go before him unto the other side, while he sent the multitudes away.

23 And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone.

24 But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary.

25 And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea.

26 And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear.

27 But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.

28 And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water.

29 And he said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus.

30 But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me.

31 And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?

32 And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased.

33 Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God.

NLT

Matthew 14:22 Immediately after this, Jesus insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and cross to the other side of the lake, while he sent the people home.

23 After sending them home, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone.

24 Meanwhile, the disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves.

25 About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water.

26 When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. In their fear, they cried out, "It's a ghost!"

27 But Jesus spoke to them at once. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Take courage. I am here!"

28 Then Peter called to him, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water."

29 "Yes, come," Jesus said. So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus.

30 But when he saw the strong wind and the waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted.

31 Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him. "You have so little faith," Jesus said. "Why did you doubt me?"

32 When they climbed back into the boat, the wind stopped.

33 Then the disciples worshiped him. "You really are the Son of God!" they exclaimed.

The People, Places, and Times

Sea of Galilee. Although not explicit in Matthew's account, it is more clear in Mark's Gospel (6:45–53) that Jesus walked on the Sea of Galilee, located north of Jerusalem. Scholars estimate that Jesus did many of His most notable miracles, at least eighteen, in and around the communities bordering this body of water.

The Apostle Peter. Peter and his brother Andrew were the first disciples Jesus called (Mark 1:16–17). He was known for his impulsive nature and forceful personality, as well as his special relationship with Jesus. Jesus Himself changed his name from Simon to Peter (or Cephas), which means "rock" (Matthew 16:18). Although Peter denied Jesus three times before Jesus' crucifixion, after receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, Peter was the first to preach to the crowds. He ultimately became one of the Gospel's most passionate and tireless ambassadors, suffering persecution, beatings, and imprisonment until he was martyred around AD 67.

What traits of Peter's faith during his time learning from Jesus are admirable? Which needed further growth?

Background

In the preceding verses, Jesus dealt with the devastating news of the imprisonment and execution of His cousin John the Baptist at the hands of Herod the tetrarch (Matthew 14:1–13). He sought to get away from the crowd and retreated by Himself to a remote place to rest. However, crowds of people from surrounding towns began to seek after Jesus. As the evening set in, the disciples sought to send the people on their way to fend for themselves for dinner, but Jesus objected.

He ordered His disciples to give the people something to eat. The disciples were perplexed at Jesus' command, but it was all a setup for a display of His unquestionable power and convincing proof of His ability to defy natural law. With five loaves and two fishes, Jesus blessed His Father and turned little into overflow, feeding five thousand men, not including women and children (Matthew 14:13–21). After this, Jesus sent the disciples away by boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee while He recharged in prayer.

At-A-Glance

1. Jesus Replenishes His Power (Matthew 14:22–23)
2. Jesus Defies the Laws of Nature (vv. 24–27)
3. Jesus Calls Peter to Step Out (vv. 28–29)
4. Jesus' Power Declared (vv. 30–33)

In Depth

1. Jesus Replenishes His Power (Matthew 14:22–23) Jesus, after His exhausting time of ministry and meeting the spiritual and natural needs of the people, again seeks to commune alone with His Father in prayer. Jesus sends the disciples ahead of Him by boat while dismissing the crowds that gathered to see Him. He sought to be alone with His Father to recharge and regroup. In this scene, we see the humanity of Jesus and the dependency that He had on the Father and the Holy Spirit in His daily life and ministry. Through Jesus, we have a model for how we should carve out time away from the busyness of life to steal away with the Father. In His presence we are refreshed, renewed, and empowered to continue on with His purpose. It sets the perfect stage for the next scene, in which we see the perfect exhibition of the divinity of Jesus Christ.

2. Jesus Defies the Laws of Nature (vv. 24–27) Matthew shifts the scene. While on the boat, the disciples encounter torrential winds and waves in their travel, which is very unsettling even for the trade fishermen to navigate. In this brewing storm, between 3 and 6 o'clock in the morning, the disciples see a figure walking toward them and become terrified. Out of fear, their imaginations take them to the worst possible scenario, and they conclude that it was a threatening figure. They begin to scream out with terror, "It's a ghost!" not realizing that it was Jesus (v. 26, NLT). Upon their reaction, Jesus immediately calls on His disciples to calm down and "take courage" (v. 27, NLT) because He has arrived on the scene among the waves and wind. Jesus' appearance on the water is not an everyday occurrence, and it is not something that has been repeated. He defies all natural laws by walking on the water.

Scholars are still trying to rationalize how this could have happened, and if it really occurred as recorded. However, as Christians, we accept it as truth because the One who created the seas has the power to walk on them and is sovereign over all the earth. What should the Christian response be when skeptics try to rationalize away the miraculous works Jesus performed?

3. Jesus Calls Peter to Step Out (vv. 28–29) Peter, often being the spokesman of the group and bold enough to ask the tough questions, puts Jesus to the test after hearing His voice. Peter responds, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water" (v. 28, NLT). It was Peter's personality to take Jesus at His word and take risks of faith which would prove to be invaluable for his future role in the church. No one since has successfully walked on water, but in the Spirit, as we receive a word from the Lord to do something, we have the ability to defy the odds through the power of the Holy Spirit.

4. Jesus' Power Declared (vv. 30–33) As Peter leaves the boat, he notices within his natural senses what is happening around him and becomes afraid. The wind gets stronger, and as it presses his body, he gets nervous, which causes him to take his eyes off Jesus. As Peter becomes frightened, he sinks and cries out to Jesus to save him because he thinks he was going to drown. Matthew notes that Jesus immediately reacts and stretches out His hand to pull Peter from the water and get him to safety. Jesus then asks him, “Why did you doubt me?” (v. 31, NLT). Once Jesus and Peter get into the boat, the winds and waves cease and everything is still and peaceful. All of the disciples worship Jesus, acknowledging He “thou art the Son of God” (v. 33).

How often do we take our eyes off Jesus when things don't look like what we expect, even though we have been given a word from the Lord to go forward in faith?

Search the Scriptures

1. What was Peter's response to the sight of Jesus walking on water (Matthew 14:28)?
2. How did Jesus react to the disciples and Peter's trouble on the water (vv. 27, 31)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. How can we apply this Scripture to our lives today? Drawing on the example of Scripture, what things can we do corporately and individually to step out on faith?
2. Jesus' response to Peter's cry for help was immediate. What does that mean for when you cry out for help? What keeps us in fear?

Liberating Lesson

God is still performing signs and wonders today as we call on the name of His Son Jesus.

We should seek the Lord's Will for our lives to receive vision and be empowered by the Holy Spirit to get in alignment to make the miraculous happen in our age. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead lives within us. Just as the apostles turned the world upside down at the Word of the Lord to establish the church, we live on as His fruit on the earth.

Application for Activation

We are encouraged to fix our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith, who for the sake of the joy set before Him endured the Cross and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2). If we truly believe that Jesus ever lives to make intercession for us, we must trust that we are safe in His arms and follow His lead.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Matthew 14:22–33 **22 And straightway Jesus constrained his disciples to get into a ship, and to go before him unto the other side, while he sent the multitudes away.** Jesus multiplied bread for five thousand people in a desert place (vv. 13–21) where He had retreated with His disciples. His withdrawal was motivated by a report of Herod’s beheading of His cousin John the Baptist and by the king’s comments about Him and the miracles He was performing (vv. 1–2, 13).

After feeding the people with the bread, they were overwhelmed and wanted to appoint Him king (John 6:15). Jesus rejected this as a potential threat to His mission on earth. Jesus’ purpose on earth was to serve, not to be served (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45). This situation led Jesus to constrain His disciples to leave the scene immediately while He dismissed the crowd. The Greek word for constrained is *anagkazo* (ah-nahng-KAHD-zo), which means to physically or mentally compel or force somebody to do something. It is derived from *anagke* (Gk. ah-NAHNG-kay), which means necessity or need. There was an imperative motive for Jesus to send His disciples ahead.

23 And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone. After He sent them away, Jesus climbs the mountain to communicate with the Father. At some critical periods of Jesus’ earthly ministry, He isolates Himself from the crowd and even His disciples to pray. Jesus withdraws into the wilderness for prayer in periods of great popularity (Luke 5:16). Jesus entreats us to withdraw in our closet to pray to God (Matthew 6:6). It is therefore important for Christians today to emulate our Lord and retreat from noise and busyness at times to pray. Jesus was alone at evening. We should not be confused about the use of “evening” twice in this chapter in the narrative sequence. The Jews divided the day into three periods: morning, noon, and evening (cf. Psalm 55:17). The evening was in turn subdivided into two parts: the first evening began at sunset (twilight) and the second began when the sun was fully set (dusk) (cf. Exodus 12:6 literally “between the evenings”). The Greek word for evening was *opsios* (OP-see-ose) which could refer either to the period before sunset or right after sundown but was sometimes used for the two. In context, however, it is logical to ascribe the first mention of evening (14:15) to the first evening and the current one to after sunset. Jesus was left praying alone when it was night.

24 But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary. While Jesus was on the mountain praying, the disciples were on the sea tossed with waves. They encountered a contrary wind that would eventually lead them to Gennesaret. Mark tells us that Jesus saw that the disciples were battling with the contrary wind (Mark 6:48). We

cannot be certain if Jesus saw them physically or supernaturally. The current event is taking place after they had left the desert place for quite a long time. Still, John states that it was already night when they encountered the wind. It would have been difficult for Jesus to see from such a long distance. In any case, if Jesus at the beginning of His ministry could see Nathanael (John 1:50) from afar, it is not unlikely that He could see the disciples by the divine endowments of the Holy Spirit.

25 And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea. The Jews divided the night into three watches and the Romans divided it into four between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. Jesus, therefore, came to the disciples between three and six o'clock in the morning.

Around this time, Jesus appeared to them in an unprecedented fashion by walking on the sea. There was probably no boat left for Him to join the disciples, so He joined them the fastest way possible: by walking out to their boat across the water. Great figures of Old Testament history such as Moses, Joshua, Elijah, and Elisha did miracles involving parting of water bodies, but never has it been recorded that anyone else walked on water (Exodus 14:21, 22; Joshua 3:15-17; 2 Kings 2:8, 14). This action of Jesus clearly portrays His divine nature.

26 And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear. The disciples saw someone walking on water at night and with a contrary wind. The disciples could not fathom this scene, assuming the being they saw was a spirit. The Greek word for spirit here is *phantasma* (FAHN-tahsmah), meaning phantom or “a ghost” (NLT). Our perception of reality always shapes our responses and reactions. They expressed their inner feelings of fear outwardly by a strident noise. Their fear could have been due to prevailing cultural beliefs of the time. In the ancient Near East, the sea was thought to be the realm of powerful, chaotic beings (cf. Job 41; Revelation 13:1). They undoubtedly thought Jesus was a “ghost” that would do them harm. Their deduction that it was a ghost led them to fear (Gk. *phobos*, FOE-bose), which means fear, dread, terror—that which is caused by intimidation or adversaries.

27 But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid. The Lord is always prompt in coming to rescue us. “Be of good cheer” or “take courage” (NLT) are phrases of encouragement and comfort (cf. Matthew 9:22). It resonates when we have a challenging task ahead; it will re-echo if we are in peril or in the face of danger, such as the current case facing the disciples.

The Lord wants us to “be of good cheer” and not be afraid because of His presence. “It is I” is the translation of *ego eimi* (Gk. eg-O ay-MEE), which echoes the “I am” God’s self-revelation to Moses (Exodus 3:14) and other similar passages (Isaiah 43:12). We have this promise of Jesus in Matthew 28:20: “I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (NLT). We should therefore not be afraid even in our darkest circumstances or the most violent storm of our lives.

28 And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water. Peter’s request was not portraying a doubt about the identity of the one walking on water. Scholars suggest the phrase “since it is you” is an acceptable rendering of “if it be thou.”

Peter has an extroverted personality. His request might have been guided by the delegation of power Jesus granted them over sicknesses and demons (Matthew 10:8). Knowing Jesus had freely given His disciples power to do all that Christ Himself did, Peter wished to test his ability to perform this new miracle. Since it was the Lord, He can grant Peter with this authority over physical laws also.

29 And he said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus. Jesus granted Peter's request by the word "come." It should not be perceived here as a mere invitation but rather as a delegation of power or a transfer of authority. Jesus had already deputized His followers to spread the message of the coming Kingdom (Matthew 10), and would later promise them they would do all His miracles and more (John 14:12). Peter therefore took the first step and came out of the ship. Once he was out of the boat and on the sea, he could walk just as Jesus was doing.

30 But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me. We can perform greater works by faith as long as we keep on looking at the Lord who instructs us. Anytime we shift our focus from the Lord to the challenge, we will start to experience failure. Here Peter fails to look at the Lord, who instructed him to come but rather focused on the wind. Fear and faith do not coexist. Solid faith will drive out fear, but fear will also drive out faith.

With a wavering faith, Peter's feet on top of the water also wavered. When Peter realized he was sinking, he cried to Jesus, saying, "Lord, save me." Our faith may fail us at times, but ultimately Jesus is our last recourse in peril or danger. Instinctively, Peter cried out of fear and despair for the rescue of the Lord.

31 And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt? Jesus did not tarry in rescuing Peter. Without any delay, He stretched His hand to seize the drowning Peter. Peter walked quite a distance since Jesus could just stretch His hand to get hold of Him. Jesus rebuked him after He got hold of him. The Greek word for "little faith" is oligopistos (oh-lee-GO-pees-tose), and it is used only by the Lord to gently rebuke His disciples for their anxiety. Our cry of desperation will always be heard, and God will swiftly deliver us from our trouble, but we must expect a gentle rebuke from our loving Lord. While calling His followers "little faith" must be understood as a rebuke, we can also be encouraged in this name. Jesus will also tell His followers that only a little faith is needed to move mountains (Matthew 17:20).

32 And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased. 33 Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, of a truth thou art the Son of God. Peter walked back with Jesus to the boat. When the two entered the ship, the wind ceased. With the ending of the storm, the disciples realized the true personality of Jesus. This Man could multiply five loaves of bread for five thousand people, walk on water, and still the wind. Who could that person be except the promised Son of God? The Roman officer and the soldiers made the same confession when they witnessed the events at Jesus' death and were filled with awe (Matthew 27:50-54).

The term used for worship is proskuneo (Gk. pros-koo-NEH-oh), which signifies to fall prostrate in front of the one being worshiped. The same word is used when Cornelius welcomed Peter into his house. Peter's objection that he was also a man points to the fact that this action is appropriate only to the highest of Lords (Acts 10:25–26).

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Let's Sing of the Lord's Faithfulness
(Isaiah 38:16-20)

TUESDAY

The Baptist Dies for the Faith
(Matthew 14:1-12)

WEDNESDAY

The Crowd's Hunger Satisfied
(Matthew 14:13-21)

THURSDAY

Believe the One Sent to You
(John 6:22-29)

FRIDAY

The Sick Are Healed
(Matthew 14:34-36)

SATURDAY

Speak Confidently to Civil Authorities
(Mark 13:9-12)

SUNDAY

Savior of the Fearful, Doubter, Needy
(Matthew 14:22-33)