

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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COME TO ME ON THE WATER

Matthew 14:22-33

The story about Jesus and Peter walking on the water is a vivid lesson about the role of faith in being a disciple of Christ. This very unusual incident is spoken of in three gospels. We read about it in Matthew, in Mark, and also in John. Each evangelist tells the story from his own perspective. When we put them all together, we have a fairly good idea of what the apostles experienced on the lake of Galilee that day. Let's read from Matthew's perspective in Matthew 14:22-33.

Matthew 14:22. Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away.

23 And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there.

24 But the boat was now in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary.

25 Now in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them, walking on the sea.

26 And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear.

27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid."

28 And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water."

29 So He said, "Come." And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus.

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

31 And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"

32 And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

33 Then those who were in the boat came and worshiped Him, saying, "Truly You are the Son of God."

After the feeding of the five thousand

If you look at a map, you will see that the lake of Galilee is shaped like a pear, with the narrow end pointing south. It is about 20 kilometers long and 13 kilometers wide at the point of greatest breadth. The east side of the lake is characterized by a wall of sharply raised hills. It was on that side that the feeding of the five thousand took place – a miracle that is closely linked with our passage.

We are told in v. 22 that *immediately* (after the feeding of the five thousand) *Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away.* Jesus' sudden desire to dismiss the crowd and send the disciples off in their boat is explained in the

gospel of John. We learn from John 6:15 that *when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone.* The effect of the miracle was so great that people believed Him to be that Prophet who should lead Israel in revolt against the Romans and establish a theocratic government. And the disciples seemed to have been caught in the same excitement. Jesus is said to have ‘constrained’ (KJV) them to get into the boat, which indicates that they were not very willing to go.

Jesus sent them *to the other side.* *The other side* means the west side of the lake of Galilee and that is where we find them arriving in v. 34 (Gennesaret).

After the people were dispersed, Jesus went up into the hills, on the eastern side of the lake, to pray. In view of the temptation (when human honours were offered to Him, and almost forced upon Him), He retired for private prayer. The people were ready to acclaim Him king, but He knew that human proclamation was only the way of the devil (cf. Matthew 4:1-11). He had to secure salvation for men through death and resurrection. Nothing is better to keep the mind humble than to seek the presence of God in a lonely place. That is why He wanted time all alone to communicate with His Father. He prayed until the ‘fourth watch of the night’ (v. 25), i.e., until 3-6 o’clock a.m.

Habitual communion with God is a safeguard against temptation. In fact, it is impossible to remain strong and faithful to Christ without spending time alone with Him in prayer on a regular basis. This is one of the basic principles of spiritual growth and ministry.

A storm on the lake

While Jesus was praying, a wind from the west rose. It was blowing across the lake. Picture in your mind the scene. The disciples are in their boat, trying to cross the lake. At that time, a storm arose. Their boat was *tossed by the waves* (v. 24). The word ‘tossed’ (*basanizo*) means to be pitched about with great force. The waves hit them with such violence that their lives were in danger. Moreover, we are told in the same verse (v. 24) that *the wind was contrary.* They were trying to fight their way up against the wind, struggling to move forward with little success.

So these fishermen rowed the whole night with all their strength, only to cover a distance of twenty-five to thirty furlongs John tells us (John 6:19). One furlong is 185 meters. Thirty furlongs is about 6 kilometers. We mentioned that the lake was 13 kilometers wide. This means that on the fourth watch of the night, they were right in the middle of the lake.

The disciples must have been totally discouraged. ‘We are cold and we are very tired now. We haven’t had any sleep all night. We are stuck here, in the middle of the lake of Galilee, and in the midst of a storm. If this storm continues to hit us, we won’t be able to get to the other side. Maybe we should turn back and go with the wind.’ They were physically exhausted, having struggled against the storm for hours.

It is a ghost!

Now imagine this. It is about four o’clock in the morning. The storm is still howling. The waves are lashing against the boat. And because of the spray of the waves, it is very misty. You cannot see much, and you cannot hear much either. On the east, the sky was beginning to get bright in front of the disciples. Remember that they were not canoeing. They were rowing. When you row, you face the direction opposite to the one you are going. The disciples were moving toward the west, and so they were facing east. They could see the sky getting golden in front of them. Behind them, the sky is still black.

And then, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, they saw something moving on the water. They saw a figure walking towards them. That was about the last straw for them. They were exhausted, they were struggling for their lives and on top of all this, they were now face to face with a something that did not look too natural. *They were frightened, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear* (v. 26). In their mind, it was a spirit or a ghost, because a human being cannot walk on the water. Given the popular belief that the sea was the home of evil spirits (Revelation 13:1), they undoubtedly thought that the ghost meant to do them harm and that their death was at hand.

And so, they cried out in fear until came a reassuring voice saying, *Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid* (v. 27). The expression 'take courage' is very typical of the Lord Jesus. He uses it eight times, and nobody else in the NT uses that expression.

'Take courage. Don't be afraid. It's Me, Jesus.' The Lord Jesus gave assurance of His presence to the disciples, yet they were not quite sure it was Him. Notice how Peter responded. *Lord, if it is You...* 'If it is You...' Why was Peter still uncertain? Because he was not able to see the face of Jesus. He recognized the voice but he could not see who it was. Remember that it was the fourth watch. From this, we know that it was dawn. Jesus was coming from the east, the direction the disciples were facing. The light is dawning in the east. Therefore the light was behind Jesus. The men in the boat could only see a silhouette, a dark form against the brightening sky behind. Jesus' face was too dark to be identified. That explains Peter's hesitation. He could only see the shape of Jesus walking towards him against the dawning sky.

A daring request

Notice the rest of Peter's sentence. *Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.* That seems to be quite an impetuous request. Why didn't Peter wait for Jesus to come to the boat? He hears Jesus saying, 'It is I. Don't be afraid.' And what does he do? He gets up in the midst of the storm and he says to Jesus, 'If it is you, call me to come to You upon the water.' Why did he have to walk out to Jesus? We know Peter's impulsive character. Was he just being too impatient? Not at all. Here we need to look at the other accounts.

In the parallel passage in Mark, we have this very important detail.

*Mark 6:48. And seeing them straining at the oars, for the wind was against them, at about the fourth watch of the night, He came to them, walking on the sea; and **He intended to pass by them.***

The last sentence says that Jesus meant to pass by the boat. He was not walking towards the boat, but passing it. Why was He not walking straight towards the boat? One reason might be that He had regard for the fear of His disciples. These men were experienced sailors. They knew how to handle natural forces. But when it comes to a spirit, they could not deal with it. It was too much of a terror. And the nearer Jesus was, the greater was their fear until Jesus began to walk by them. At least, if you see a ghost that is not walking straight at the boat, you can have some hope that you will be safe. If he is walking somewhat past the boat, there is a good chance that this figure will not attack you in some way or other. And therefore, knowing how frightened the disciples were, knowing that His voice might not be enough to reassure them, Jesus did not walk straight at them in the storm. He walked by them.

Peter recognized the sound of Jesus' voice, but not necessarily His face. It is much like when we pick up the telephone and we recognize the voice even though we don't see that person. So, not having seen but having heard that it was Jesus, and then noticing that Jesus was passing by, Peter said, *Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.*

Again, remember the context: the hours of struggle for survival against the storm, the fear that strikes a person when thoughts of death face that person, the state of shock from seeing an apparition.

‘The Lord is passing us by. He is going to the other side and we are going to be left behind in the boat. Please, don’t leave me here in the boat. Take me with you. Command me to walk to you. Save me out of this danger.’ You see, it was not just a question of waiting a few more seconds and Jesus arrives in the boat. Jesus was passing by the boat. He was not coming to join the disciples in the boat. That is the reason why Peter asked the Lord Jesus to take him along. ‘I want to come to You. Please, Lord. Don’t leave me here.’

Peter was not thinking in terms of miracles. His mind was too occupied for that. He was in a hopeless situation and he wanted to be saved. At that moment, his thoughts were on the love and power of Jesus to save him. Christ was his only hope for being saved from death.

Peter walks on the water

Jesus answered with one word, *Come*. Notice that Jesus did not rebuke Peter. He could have said, ‘What a silly request! You think you can walk on the water? And even if you can, why would you do that?’ No, He didn’t rebuke him at all. He simply said, ‘Come to Me. By all means, come.’

And what does Peter do? *Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus* (v. 29). Peter had faith that Christ could save him. Notice that Peter did not ask Jesus for a promise. ‘Lord, promise me that I won’t sink.’ He asked for a command because he had learned that the commands of Jesus, when received with faith, make able people. And so, in obedience to the Lord’s call, Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water towards Jesus. This is an amazing lesson about faith. ‘At your word, Lord, I come.’ We can do that which is naturally impossible if we have divine authorization and the faith to take the Lord at His word.

Having walked some distance, he started to think of the storm. He could feel the wind and the waves. With his two feet on the water, he was trying to keep his balance. The lake was still holding him up. And suddenly, he felt uncertain about the whole situation. ‘What am I doing here? What did I get myself into?’ Once again, he became filled with fear. *But seeing the wind*, we read in v. 30, ***he became afraid***.

Fear and faith do not go together. Peter had his eyes on Jesus. He believed that Jesus had the power to save him. But then, he got distracted by the fierce wind. It was when he turned his attention away from Christ to the circumstances that his faith began to weaken. His mistake was to allow the material facts, i.e., the wind, to weigh more heavily than the power of Jesus. Hence he became afraid.

Notice what happens now. As he began to be afraid, listen to these incredible words, he was ***beginning to sink***. Have you ever seen somebody ‘beginning to sink’? The moment you step into the water, you don’t begin to sink. You just disappear into the water. But here, Peter had time to say three words. *Lord, save me* (v. 30). Actually, the Lord gave him the time to say those words. He let him begin to sink. This means that even as Peter was sinking, Jesus was still holding him up. If Jesus had let him go at that moment, he would have sunk outright, perhaps to the bottom of the lake. Jesus let him learn a lesson of faith. And once more, Peter turns to the Lord. Once more, he cries out to Him. *Lord, save me*.

Jesus responded to this desperate cry ‘immediately’ by stretching out his hand to Peter and lifting him up again. And then, what did He do? Did He carry Peter in His arms to the boat? Not at all. It seems that He made him walk back again so that he may complete the lesson of faith. He set him on his feet upon the water and enabled him to walk with him to the boat. Imagine the sight! Jesus and Peter walking side by side upon the lake until *they got into the boat* (v. 32).

Faith: five characteristics

This passage is really a lesson, a wonderful lesson about faith. And I would like to conclude by bringing out to you five points concerning the Christian faith.

(1) Firstly, faith comes by hearing. At first, Peter did not see Jesus clearly. He was not fully assured that it was his Lord. But knowing His voice, he was ready to believe that it might be Christ. And therefore, he ventured to speak to Him. Paul writes in Romans 10:17, *Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ*. When you hear the word of God preached, you recognize the voice of Jesus speaking to you. You recognize that these are the words of truth that can destroy the power of sin in this world. Faith then grows. Not only do you hear Him, you will see Him. *When Jesus got into the boat, those who were in the boat came and worshiped Him, saying, "Truly You are the Son of God (v. 33)." 'Now we know. Our eyes have seen. You are certainly God's Son.'* Faith, after being exercised and tested, gets to greater degrees of strength.

(2) By responding to Jesus, you begin to see how wonderful He is. And He becomes more and more precious to you. Jesus was so precious to Peter that he did not want to be left behind. 'If you are going, take me with You. I don't want to be separated from You. Where you go, Lord, I want to go.' In 1Peter 2:7, it is expressed in this way. *To you who believe, He is precious*. Is Jesus precious because you believe, or do you believe because He is precious? Both are true! The more you believe, the more you respond to His call, the more you experience His preciousness. And the more you experience His preciousness, the more you trust Him.

(3) Faith does God's will. Notice that Peter did not just step out on the water and walk to Jesus. He said, 'Command me to go to You, Lord.' Peter understood that if Jesus does not call, you just don't do it. So he asked Jesus to tell him to walk. You see, faith is always about doing God's will, doing His command. But does that mean that faith is something mechanical and passive? Absolutely not! And this is the fourth point.

(4) Genuine faith shows initiative. Peter did not say to himself, 'Since Jesus didn't call me, I will sit in the boat and wait.' *You do not have*, James writes, *because you do not ask* (James 4:2). Those who have faith are able to say, 'Lord, ask me to do it, and at your command, I will do it' – even if it seems impossible.

(5) Faith involves commitment. Put yourself in Peter's shoes and imagine the level of commitment that you need to have in order to step out of your boat in the midst of a storm and believe that the water can hold you up. It requires a total commitment on your part. This is not a question of whether you can swim or not. Peter was not reckoning on the fact that he could swim when he left the boat. He staked everything on Jesus' one word, 'Come'. If Jesus was wrong, Peter was in big trouble. That is commitment. And faith involves that kind of commitment.