

WALKING ON THE WATER

Introduction

Christianity is more than a set of beliefs or moral principles – it involves personal interaction with the risen and exalted Lord Jesus Christ. We are given a picture of that in the way Jesus and disciples acted towards each other in this story.

Background

Two things encourage the reader to expect blessing in the story.

The incident occurred immediately after the feeding of the 5000. The disciples had witnessed a great miracle. They had seen Jesus' power. They had even taken part in it as his servants – the bread, as it were, multiplied in their hands. That should have produced a strong faith and confidence in him.

The story begins with an act of obedience on their part. They wanted to remain with Jesus, not leave him on his own. Besides, it was late in the day, not a good time to start a lengthy voyage across the lake. It is remarkable that they obeyed his instructions.

On the basis of those two things we get the impression we are reading about good men, and men who have great confidence in their Lord. Christians, at least those with spiritual experience, can identify with that. Faith and confidence is what we would expect of ourselves. The disciples' story suggests shows that faith can fluctuate. It also shows Jesus; faithfulness, something we need to believe firmly.

The events and their lessons

The gospel writer records four things that happened within a short time. He also mentions how they ended. Each one has lessons for disciples in any age.

The first is that they encountered a life-threatening storm. It happened to be during the last watch of the night, when they were most tired. It may seem surprising that the Person who fed the 5000 did not protect his own disciples from this danger.

That brings us the first lesson. **FOLLOWING JESUS DOES NOT GIVE IMMUNITY FROM TROUBLE.**

That was obvious in other circumstances, such as the death of Lazarus. Jesus also warned about persecution. Since his death there have been many martyrs, more in the twentieth century than at any other time.

If we ask, 'Why?' we find a number of explanations.

Suffering is the common lot of humanity; there is no reason why Christians should be exempt.

It teaches us sympathy for others, something we would not have otherwise. That was the case with Jesus also (Hebrews 2).

It gives opportunity to glorify God, and assert our righteousness, in a unique way. As we endure patiently we are saying in effect that God deserves our love and trust even in such a situation. And it will not last for ever.

Secondly, Jesus appeared to them, walking on the water.

At first they did not recognise him and were terrified. When he spoke they recognised him. When they recognised him they had peace in place of fear.

This teaches us that **JESUS IS WITH HIS PEOPLE IN TIMES OF TROUBLE.**

It makes no difference if we are not aware of his presence. It makes no difference if we are amazed he has allowed such trouble to come. He is near us. Jesus saw his disciples toiling; that is what prompted him to go to them.

God's people often fail to understand what he is doing, and why he treats them in a certain way. Job experienced that, and finding himself unable to sense his presence in prayer he concluded, 'He knows the way that I take'. Faith in the dark is stronger faith than faith when we have many things to comfort and guide us.

At such times of spiritual darkness our wisdom is to go to Christ's words. Comfort did not come with relief from the storm; it came with Christ speaking to them. Similarly, we find our peace, not from changing circumstances (in the first instance) but in Christ speaking in the words of the Bible. It is true that he sometimes makes those words conspicuously personal so we cannot doubt his presence, but the point is that we look to the Bible rather than our feelings or circumstances.

God communicates. It can happen that he gives an overwhelming sense of his presence, but his normal way of revealing himself is to speak. That should not surprise us for that is what we do also – silence leaves doubt, while speech reveals.

The third thing that happened is that Simon Peter requested permission to join him, walking on the water. It was an extraordinary request but it shows commendably strong faith. Why did he do that? There are a number of possible reasons.

People are attracted to the supernatural. This was awesome.

Jesus draws people – it was not the first time Simon had wanted to be with Jesus.

He could see Jesus' victory over the forces of nature that threatened to overwhelm them.

He wanted to share that victory.

Jesus responded by telling Peter to join him, walking on the water. And he did.

There is a great lesson here. **ALTHOUGH JESUS IS MIGHTY HE IS ALSO FAMILIAR WITH HIS PEOPLE.**

We tend to think the two things cannot co-exist – the greater a person is the less likely they are to take to do with ordinary mortals. But it is not so with God. 'Though the LORD is on high, yet he regards the lowly' (Psalm 138:6). Our Creator says, 'On this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at my word' (Isaiah 66:2).

Peter wanted to share Jesus' victory over the forces of nature that threatened them. The gospel tells us of Jesus' great victory over sin and all its consequences, and the glory he now has. He calls us to share in his victory, and in that glory.

When we are troubled by our spiritual disorder, or our guilt, we find relief in him who bore the sin of the world on the cross, yet rose again from the dead and lives forever. If Jesus is ours, 'We are more than conquerors through him who loved us' (Romans 8:37).

If death is what we fear we should think of him who died for us, was buried, and rose again the third day. He says, 'Because I live, you shall live also' (John 14:19).

Do we long to share his holiness? He gives the Holy Spirit to all who believe in him. 'He who believes in me ... out of his heart will flow rivers of living water' (John 7:38).

It must have seemed impossible to Peter to walk on the water, yet at Jesus' word he did it. It may seem impossible to us to be children of God, yet the scripture says, 'Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!' (1 John 3:1). And, 'Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba,

Father” (Galatians 4:6). Jesus’ declaration of God was so ‘that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I in them’ (John 17:26).

We may be aware of the vast difference between our human condition and the glory of the Lord Jesus now. He promises that all his people will share that glory. ‘To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with me in my throne, as I also overcame and sat down with my Father in his throne’ (Revelation 3:21).

If Peter rejoiced at receiving Jesus’ permission to walk to him on the water, we too should rejoice at the victory he is giving to us.

The fourth part of the story follows on from Peter walking on the water to go to Jesus. After sharing Jesus victory over the forces of nature he suddenly fell victim to them. That corresponds to Christian experience when a person may fall into a sin or into ungodly fears after experiencing victory in Jesus. That happened to Elijah after his victory over the prophets of Baal.

Why did it happen? We need to consider what was taking place on that occasion. When Peter got out of the boat the main thought in his mind was Christ’s power. When he looked at the waves his main thought was the danger his circumstances posed. Jesus responds to our faith, or lack of it. It is said that in Nazareth ‘he did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief’ (Matthew 13:58).

When we experience victory it is easy to forget that we depend on Christ for everything. We may forget to pray, assuming that all will be well. Or we may enter a storm and imagine our survival depends on ourselves alone. Christ responds to our unbelief, we are allowed to suffer for a while, and (hopefully) that brings us back to faith in him

The lessons is, **OUR STRENGTH IS CHRIST ALONE, ALWAYS**

Conclusion

Christ’s greatness and our smallness make an unlikely combination, as does his grace and our sin.

It is always tempting to admire him from a distance without having much interaction.

The challenge for us is live consistently as people who are loved, as weak people who are strong in Christ, as victorious people who are dependent on Christ. We are not yet at the end of the journey.