

Matthew 14:22-33

I. Matthew 14:22-24 – Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them.

Matthew wants us to feel the tension here. Jesus is on the mountain alone while the disciples are a long way from the land, beaten by the waves. The disciples are in trouble, and Jesus is far away. John tells us that the disciples were about three miles from the shore which would put them right about in the middle of the lake (John 6:19). And we'll learn in the next verse that it was now the fourth watch of the night (somewhere between 3:00 and 6:00 A.M.). So the disciples have been working hard all night and getting nowhere. Their boat was "beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them". Other translations say that the waves were battering the boat, buffeting the boat, and distressing the boat. Mark tells us that the *disciples* were "*harassed* in rowing" (6:48; NASB marg.). Matthew and Mark both use a word here that literally means "tormented". So the disciples in the boat were being tormented and harassed by the waves... for the wind was against them. You could say that the disciples were at the mercy of an angry and hostile sea.

Now you may remember from our study of Jesus' calming of the storm in Matthew chapter eight that in the Old Testament there was an entire theology of the sea. In the pagan cultures of Moses' day the sea (yam) was pictured as a chaotic, uncontrollable monster/god that needed to be captured and slain by the other gods. So for example, one ancient text reads like this:

"What foe rises against Baal, what enemy against the rider on the clouds? Did I not destroy Yam [sea] the darling of El, did I not make an end of Nahar [river] the great god? Was not the dragon [Leviathan] captured and vanquished? I did destroy the wriggling serpent, the tyrant with seven heads..." (quoted in TDOT).

Contrast this fighting among the gods with the creation account of Moses where the sea is simply the *creation* of the one true God!

✓ Genesis 1:2, 9-10 – The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas.

The sea may be chaotic and unruly, but it must always *obey* the command of its Creator! And so listen to how the Psalmist celebrates God's power in creation:

✓ Psalm 104:5-9, 24-26 – You covered [the earth] with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. ***At your rebuke they fled; at the sound of your thunder they***

took to flight. The mountains rose, the valleys sank down to the place that you appointed for them. *You set a boundary that they may not pass*, so that they might not again cover the earth... O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; *the earth is full of your creatures. Here is the sea, great and wide, which teems with creatures innumerable*, living things both small and great. *There go the ships, and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it.*

Yahweh is the only true God, and He is the creator and ruler of the powerful sea.

- ✓ Job 26:12-13 – By his power [in creation] he stilled the *sea*; by his understanding he shattered *Rahab*. By his wind the heavens were made fair; his hand pierced the *fleeing serpent*.

When God rebuked the sea, it fled. God shattered Rahab and pierced the fleeing serpent. When God set a boundary for the sea, the sea could not escape.

- ✓ Job 38:8-11 – Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb, when I made clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed limits for it and set bars and doors, and said, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed”?
- ✓ Cf. Job 7:12 – Am I the sea, or a sea monster, that you set a guard over me?

We see God’s power over the chaotic and destructive forces of the sea not only in the creation of the world, but also – and *especially* – in the salvation and redemption of His people. In the Exodus, when God led Israel out of Egypt, He brought them to the Red Sea where he divided the waters and opened up a pathway for His people to pass through the sea on dry ground.

- ✓ Exodus 15:8 – At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up; the floods stood up in a heap; the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.

Later on, both the Psalmist and Isaiah would picture this sea as a monstrous dragon that threatened the people of God and barred the way of salvation and escape. But God, who *created* the sea and then pierced the fleeing serpent so that it might not cover the earth is also powerful to slay the sea for the deliverance of His people.

- ✓ Psalm 74:12-14 (cf. Isaiah 51:9-10) – God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.

In Daniel’s vision, he sees four beasts which symbolize four great world powers that threaten the people of God. Notice especially where these four beasts come from!

- ✓ Daniel 7:2-3 – Behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. And four great beasts came up out of the sea.

The Psalmist writes:

- ✓ Psalm 69:1-2, 14 – Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck... I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me... let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters.
- ✓ Psalm 144:7-8 – Rescue me and deliver me from the many waters, from the hand of foreigners, whose mouths speak lies and whose right hand is a right hand of falsehood.
- ✓ Isaiah 17:12 (cf. Jer. 6:23) – Ah, the thunder of many peoples; they thunder like the thundering of the sea! Ah, the roar of nations; they roar like the roaring of mighty waters!

If the enemies of God and His people are compared to the raging waters of the sea, then we can take comfort once again in God's power over the sea!

- ✓ Psalm 18:16-17 – He sent from on high, he took me; he drew me out of many waters. He rescued me from my strong enemy and from those who hated me.

So God has displayed His power over the chaotic and unruly forces of the sea both in the creation of the world, and now especially in the salvation and redemption of His people. But all of this is just the guarantee that one day the power of the sea will be completely broken and vanquished *forever*. One day, God's people will be fully and finally delivered from sin and death, and then they will inherit the earth – the true Promised Land – for all eternity.

- ✓ Isaiah 27:1 – In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea.
- ✓ Isaiah 51:9-11 – Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago. ***Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over?*** And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing [yet a *second* time!]; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and ***sorrow and sighing shall flee away.***

Notice how Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in Revelation 21:

- ✓ Revelation 21:1, 3-4 – Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, ***and the sea was no more...*** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man... ***He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore.***"

So in the Bible, the sea symbolizes the enemies of God and of His people. The sea symbolizes sin and death, and anything that would ever stand in the way of the salvation of God's people. In keeping with this symbolism, the sea is pictured as a monster with many heads – a serpent or dragon called Rahab and Leviathan. But we have also seen that God is the one who rebukes the sea and it flees away. God sets boundaries for the sea and it cannot pass. God pierces the serpent, cuts Rahab in pieces, and slays the dragon when He causes the dry land to appear in creation,

when He makes a path through the sea in the exodus, and when He creates a new heavens and a new earth in which (symbolically) there will no longer be any sea. God is sovereign over the unruly and hostile powers of the sea!

So now let's return to the disciples in the boat. Matthew tells us that they were being tormented and harassed by the waves... for the wind was against them. You could say that the disciples were at the mercy of an angry and hostile sea.

II. Matthew 14:25 – And in the fourth watch of the night [Jesus] came to them, walking on the sea.

Should I have to say any more?!? Matthew, Mark, and John all tell us that Jesus came to the disciples walking not on the water, but on the *sea*. One commentator explains why he is “reluctant to affirm a literal miracle”: “Jesus usually acts miraculously only to save or help other people... But in our story the disciples are in only moderate trouble; they are not capsizing” (Bruner). This commentator is right on two counts! First of all, the disciples were apparently *not* in danger of their lives because Mark tells us that Jesus “meant to pass by them” (6:48). And second, Jesus rarely, if ever performed a miracle just for the sake of convenience, or even just to convince people of His divine power. In other words, Jesus didn't multiply the bread and the fish just to prove to people that He was God. He multiplied the bread and fish so that He could feed the crowds a meal and show them that He is the true bread from heaven. In the same way, we should not think that Jesus walked on the water just so He could impress the disciples with His divine power and prove to them that He was God. So then, *why* did Jesus come to the disciples “*walking on the sea*”? – Because He *did* come to them quite *literally* “walking on the sea”! What does it *mean* when Jesus walks on the sea?

III. Matthew 14:26-27 – But 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 heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”

This is what it means! Jesus tells us Himself. “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” The point here is not simply: Don't be afraid of the “ghost”, because it's really (just) Jesus. The point is: “Do not be afraid... period.... at all... ever. *Why*? Because “it is I”. This is a perfectly legitimate translation, but the literal translation of what Jesus said is simply this: “*I am.*” Take heart; I am. Do not be afraid. Later on, the disciples and the early church would surely have seen a connection here with God's answer to Moses in Exodus chapter three:

✓ Exodus 3:13-14 – Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

And now *Jesus* comes to the disciples and says to them, “Take heart; *I am*. Do not be afraid”! It is I. *Who*! It is I... the one who *walks on the sea*.

- ✓ Job 9:4, 8 (NKJV; cf. NIV; Ps. 77:19; Isa. 43:16; Job 38:16) – God is wise in heart and mighty in strength... He alone spreads out the heavens, and treads on the waves of the sea.

And now Jesus says: “Take heart; I am. Do not be afraid.” I am the one who treads on the waves of the sea! I am the one who pierces the fleeing serpent, and slays the dragon with many heads. I am sovereign over all other earthly and heavenly powers (Rom. 8:38-39). I have all power to deliver my people and to bring them safely to the Promised Land. It is I... the one who *walks on the sea*. Take heart. Do not be afraid.

IV. Matthew 14:28-30 – And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid...

Why was Peter afraid? Jesus said: “Do *not* be afraid.” Peter was afraid when he saw the wind... which was creating the waves on the sea. Why did Jesus tell Peter not to be afraid? Because He had come to the disciples *walking on the sea*. Peter was torn. On the one hand, there was Jesus, *walking on the stormy sea*! On the other hand, there was the *stormy sea*.

V. Matthew 14:30-31 – ...and beginning to sink [Peter] cried out, “Lord, save me.” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

As the one who *walks on the sea*, Jesus has the power to save Peter *from the sea*. And yet even as Jesus reached out his hand to take hold of Peter, He said to him: “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” Literally: Why did you waver (between two minds; cf. France)? Why were you more affected by the stormy sea than by the one who walks on the stormy sea?

VI. Matthew 14:32-33 – And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

At that moment, the disciples probably didn’t realize the full implications of what they were saying (cf. Mark 6:51-52). But they will in time – perhaps partly by thinking more deeply about what happened that night on the Sea of Galilee.

Conclusion

Truly He is the Son of God. So *why* are we of such little faith? *Why* do we doubt? *Why* do we waver between two minds? Why are we more affected by the stormy sea than by the one who *walks on the stormy sea*... the one who pierces the fleeing serpent, and slays the dragon with many heads... the one who is sovereign over all other earthly and heavenly powers... the one who has all power to deliver us, and to bring us safely into the Promised Land?

- ✓ Psalm 93:3-4 – The floods have lifted up, O LORD, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring. Mightier than the thunders of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea, the LORD on high is mighty!

Whatever our fears... *whatever* our anxieties... Jesus says to all of us who are tormented by the waves and at the mercy of a hostile sea: “Take courage; It is I. Do not be afraid.”

Teaching our Children

- ✓ Read Matthew 14:22-24 under Roman Numeral I and mention the fact that the disciples were at the mercy of an angry sea (they were being tormented and harassed!
- ✓ Review the material under Roman Numeral I (beginning with the second full paragraph) with your children. They should enjoy the picture of the sea as a serpent/dragon/monster that God overcomes/slays in creation and redemption (past, present, and future). This is a wonderful opportunity to help your children see the beauty of our salvation!

Q. In light of these things (under Roman Numeral I.), what do you think it means when Jesus comes to His disciples walking on the sea?

A. Discuss with your children; then read Matthew 14:26-27 under Roman Numeral III.
See the material under Roman Numeral III.

Q. Read Matthew 14:28-31 (IV. & V.) Why did Peter begin to sink?

A. Peter focused more on the stormy sea than on the one who was *walking on* the stormy sea!

Summarize the Conclusion with your children.