

Courage, It Is I

Mark 6:45-52 ⁴⁵ Immediately He made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while He sent the multitude away. ⁴⁶ And when He had sent them away, He departed to the mountain to pray. ⁴⁷ Now when evening came, the boat was in the middle of the sea; and He was alone on the land. ⁴⁸ Then He saw them straining at rowing, for the wind was against them. Now about the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea, and would have passed them by. ⁴⁹ And when they saw Him walking on the sea, they supposed it was a ghost, and cried out; ⁵⁰ for they all saw Him and were troubled. But immediately He talked with them and said to them, "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid." ⁵¹ Then He went up into the boat to them, and the wind ceased. And they were greatly amazed in themselves beyond measure, and marveled. ⁵² For they had not understood about the loaves, because their heart was hardened.

John Paton was a missionary to the islands of New Hebrides in the 19th century. Prior to his arrival, the cannibals had eaten the first men to arrive in the New Hebrides, and driven off another team that had been there for seven months. John Paton arrived there in 1858 at age 33 with his wife. Four months later, both his wife and his newborn son died of fever. He dug their graves with his own hands, and served alone on the island for another four years. He was then driven off the island. He remarried and returned to another of the islands in 1866. They served there for over 41 years.

He suffered from fever over 14 times. He was almost constantly in danger from the villagers.

He recorded some of his trials:

"A wild chief followed me around for four hours with his loaded musket, and, though often directed towards me, God restrained his hand. I spoke kindly to him, and attended to my work as if he had not been there,

One morning, at daybreak, I found my house surrounded by armed men, and a chief intimated that they had assembled to take my life. Seeing that I was entirely in their hands, I knelt down and gave myself away body and soul to the Lord Jesus, for what seemed the last time on earth. Rising, I went out to them, and began calmly talking about their unkind treatment of me and contrasting it with all my conduct towards them. At last some of the Chiefs, who had attended the Worship, rose and said, "Our conduct has been bad; but now we will fight for you, and kill all those who hate you." .

What was the result of Paton's courageous ministry? The entire island of Aniwa eventually turned to Jesus Christ. His journal mobilised perhaps tens of thousands of other missionaries. Today, 93 years after the death of John Paton, about 85% of the population, of what used to be called the New Hebrides islands (today Vanuatu), identifies itself as Christian, perhaps 21% of the population being evangelical.

The kind of faith-filled courage that Paton showed was used by God to break through iron bars of idolatry and witchcraft that held the Polynesian people in bondage to Satan and superstition. The same courage led Robert Moffat to South Africa in the 19th century, Hudson Taylor to China, Adoniram Judson to Burma. The message of Christ, and the cause of Christ does not move forward without courage.

We sing a hymn, "Like a Mighty Army, Moves the Church of God." I sometimes wonder if that is more aspiration than description, because the church today seems more timid than conquering. It is afraid to tell the world it believes in hell, or that Christ is the only way, or that sin is still sin, or that God created the world out of nothing in six days, or that the Bible is the living Word of God. These things will get it mocked, ridiculed. Maybe it will lose friends, customers, money.

We seem a long way off from men who were willing to lose their lives. And yet, when we read the

Gospels, we read that the apostles did not become courageous Christians overnight. In fact, at this point in the Gospel, you might call them The Trembling Twelve. The Lord steadily taught this group how to become courageous.

He didn't teach them this by telling them to look in the mirror and shout power-slogans. He taught them to be courageous by growing their faith. Fear and faith are like light and darkness. The more there is of one, the less there will be of another. In this passage, we see how Jesus wanted to teach the apostles deepened faith in Him.

Once again, this is written for our learning. If we'll look closely, we can see ourselves in the disciples. We can also see the principles for turning fear into faith. Not just for going with the Gospel to faraway islands, but for sharing the truth with that colleague; for standing up for righteousness when it is ridiculed; for choosing to raise your children in counter-culture ways; for refusing to go with the crowd in matters of materialism, morality or entertainment. It's the courage you need to be consistently Christian, thoroughly Christian inside and out, when it counts.

It's said that a young Chinese girl once read the Gospels for the first time, and then read the book of Acts and said, "Is this the same Peter?" How did timid Peter of the Gospels turn into the lion of the book of Acts. This account is one piece of the puzzle, and helps us to see how we move from fear to faith.

Let's set the scene first.

⁴⁵ Immediately He made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while He sent the multitude away.

Immediately after the feeding of the 5000, which was actually the feeding of 5000 men, but more like 20 000 people, there was a real danger. This crowd of several thousand recognised who it was who had just done this miracle. Who else could create bread and fish out of nothing, to feed thousands? This was Messiah. And if He was Messiah, He was the one to overthrow Herod, and overthrow the Romans, and set up the kingdom. Not only so, but He could make them their food, they would not have to work, they would enter paradise on Earth immediately. So the book of John tells us the crowd wanted to forcibly make Him King. Jesus did not come to realise people's political ambitions, or set up a social welfare state, or defeat the Romans or the Herodians. He came to die for sins.

Jesus knew this situation could get messy, violent, and problematic. Moreover, He knew His own disciples also had very political ideas about the kingdom, and the last thing He wanted was to have His twelve influenced by this crowd, or siding with them. So very quickly, Jesus sent them away. It's a strong word – He forced them to get into the boat, and then He used His divine authority to dismiss the crowd. Only authority like His could have sent this eager crowd away that evening, but He did.

I. The Saviour Was Watching and Praying

⁴⁶ And when He had sent them away, He departed to the mountain to pray.

⁴⁷ Now when evening came, the boat was in the middle of the sea; and He was alone on the land.

And once the disciples were in the boat, Jesus went onto a nearby mountain to pray. We don't know what he prayed for, but I am sure, as He did in John 17, He prayed for His own, and prayed that

His Father would keep them.

The disciples had gotten into the boat, and were headed for Bethsaida. It wasn't too far a journey from where they were. They would have skirted the coast, and stayed fairly close to the shoreline. But as we read here, they were way off course. Instead of being near, they were in the middle of the lake. John's Gospel tells us that they were three or four miles in. Though they had been rowing, the wind had blown them further and further in.

Now they are in the middle of the Lake. Remember back in chapter 4, the disciples had found themselves in the middle of a violent storm in the Lake. On that occasion, Jesus was in the boat with them. Where is Jesus now? Jesus is alone on the land.

But I want you to notice a deeply comforting thing.

⁴⁸ *Then He saw them straining at rowing, for the wind was against them.*

Jesus is alone on the mountain, praying. How could He have seen them? Two ways- first, this was close to Passover, so a good, full moon would have been in the sky, even if obscured by clouds, enough to clearly show the boat on the Lake. Secondly, Jesus knew all things, and if He was praying for them, He certainly would have had them on His heart. No doubt, even there, the Spirit could have shown Him, through His omniscience, where they were.

Jesus saw. He didn't merely see as a passive observer. It says, He saw them straining at rowing. The word for straining means *tormented, battered*. He saw their agonising struggle. He saw the deep trial they were in.

As we see the Lord Jesus praying, and seeing the struggle of His own, what are we reminded of?

Hebrews 4:15 *For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.*

Hebrews 7:25 *Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.*

Our Lord Jesus, who is forever the God-Man, prays for us. He does not pray for us on a mountain, but from a throne room, from a Heavenly Temple. From that vantage point, He can see our struggles. Not only does He see them happening, but He knows what they are like, for He has lived amongst us as one of us. He sees and understands our battles against temptation, against anxiety, against problems that seem to overwhelm us, against relationships that fail, and job loss, and disease. Moreover, He sees the struggle against our own sin and idolatry.

And little would the comfort be, and little would His glory be, if He had simply seen them, known their struggle and done nothing about it. But how can Jesus help them if they are in the middle of the Lake, and He is alone on the land?

The answer is, He must get to them. There is no other boat, and He cannot row single-handedly to them. He cannot swim to them in those rough seas; nor would that get Him to them soon enough. And so behold what the Lord of all creation does: He walks to them.

II. The Saviour Was Walking and Present

Now about the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea, and would have passed them by.

Understand this: He will walk down from the mountain, onto the shore, and then He will walk the distance that the boat is from the land. Where is it? We see pictures that imagine the boat a few hundred meters from the shore. No, John told us they were three miles in. Mark told us they were in the middle of the lake. How far is Jesus going to walk on water? He is going to walk, if He walks at a brisk pace, for about 30 to 40 minutes on the water. This is no tricky balancing act for Jesus. The water may as well be a stone pathway for Him.

John MacArthur wrote about Rao, the Hindu holy man, who believed he could walk on water. “He was so confident in his own spiritual power that he announced he would perform the feat before a live audience. He sold tickets at \$100 apiece. Bombay’s elite turned out *en masse* to behold the spectacle. The event was held in a large garden with a deep pool. A crowd of more than 600 had assembled. The white-bearded yogi appeared in flowing robes and stepped confidently to the edge of the pool. He paused to pray silently. A reverent hush fell on the crowd. Rao opened his eyes, looked heavenward, and boldly stepped forward. With an awkward splash he disappeared beneath the water. Sputtering and red-faced, the holy man struggled to pull himself out of the water. Trembling with rage, he shook his finger at the silent, embarrassed crowd. “One of you,” Rao bellowed indignantly, “is an unbeliever!”” (Tabletalk, April, 1990, p. 10)

Our Lord had no such problems in His three-mile walk on water. I want you to get a glimpse of the Lord you serve. Picture it from the mountain Jesus was on. The wind continues to stiffly blow, while in the middle of the Lake is a lonely boat, with at least seven, seasoned fisherman and five others, straining and exhaustedly trying to get control of the boat to avoid capsizing. And there from the shore is a solitary figure, walking purposefully, straight towards the boat. Beneath the Second Adam, the water hardens under each of his sandals. I picture each of His steps having the effect of not just hardening but flattening the water for several meters ahead of Him, while the choppy waves bounce off His pathway like frightened animals.

Who can do this?

Job 9:8 *He alone spreads out the heavens, And treads on the waves of the sea;*

Well, in the Bible, the concept of ownership was often shown by walking on something.

“Jos 1:3 *Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you, as I said unto Moses.*

Gen 13:17 *Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee.*

So when Jesus comes to them, walking on the sea, He is saying – I own this sea.

This is the power of God, and yet, in a very real way, this is the Second Adam. This kind of dominion over the created order is more than likely what Adam had before the Fall and what redeemed man will again have.

Why does the text say, Jesus would have passed them by? This is a poor translation. He was not going to bypass them. After all, this is the reason He has walked miles on water. The idea is, He intended to pass beside them, to show them His glory and comfort them. This is what Moses experienced in Exodus 33:

Exodus 33:19 *Then He said, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you.*

V22 So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by.

Our Lord desired to simply walk alongside them, causing their hearts to rest. Had they recognised Him, what should have been the response? He is here, all is well.

Isaiah 43:2 *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you.*

Unfortunately, they did not recognise Him. The end of this miracle is going to tell us why they didn't recognise Him. Their hearts were hardened.

III. The Surprise of Hardened Hearts

⁴⁹ *And when they saw Him walking on the sea, they supposed it was a ghost, and cried out;* ⁵⁰ *for they all saw Him and were troubled.*

They saw him coming to them, and instead of understanding the goodness of God, the protective presence of Christ, they saw in that circumstance a manifestation of one of the local superstitions, that there were spirits that haunted the Lake – a phantasm, a ghost. Here, in their struggle against the winds, they see nothing but evil and trial and trouble. They cry out in utter terror.

Let me ask you, Christian, to do some mental arithmetic. You say you are in Christ, and He is in You. You say He never tells lies, and He says so too. He says He will never leave you nor forsake you. He says He will be with you always, even to the end of the age. He says nothing in all creation can separate you from His love. He says no one can pluck you out of His hand. He says that He is for you and not against you. He says that His Father has given up His own Son, and so will not then withhold from us all lawful and good things. He says His own Spirit is a seal on your life, a down-payment proving that He will preserve you and collect you and give you the fullness of His presence in time to come.

So what shall we call it then, when in a trial we say, nothing good happens to me? What do we call it, when we see nothing but ghosts and terrors and problems, and suppose that our Lord does not see, does not care, and is not present? Shall we not call it *unbelief*?

The disciples were not merely frightened. Our text tells us, they were hardened. They had not yet chosen to submit to the truth, surrender to the truth of who Christ is. They were still holding out for some control over their own lives.

Gracious Lord Jesus comes to these men whose faith is nearly sinking below the waves.

But immediately He talked with them and said to them, "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid."

The word for 'Be of good cheer' is a word that means "Courage! Take heart! Be strengthened!" Not just stop fearing, but *be trusting*, be heartened. Why? Here is the reason, "It is I". It is not a ghost, it is I, Jesus. I am not here to torment you, but to help and comfort you.

But there is more to those words. They are Greek words *ego eimi*. They are the same words Jesus

spoke in John 8:57 when he told the people who were arguing with him, “Before Abraham was, I AM”. I AM. That is who is walking on the water, that is who is beside the boat, the I AM.

The root of driving out fear is seeing who it is that is our God, and who it is that is with us. That's what we sang about this morning.

Psalm 27:1 *Psalm 27:1 A Psalm of David. The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid?*

Hebrews 13:6 ⁶ *So we may boldly say: "The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"*

Jesus then gets into the boat. Consider that if you can walk on water, you don't need a boat. The reason He gets into the boat is for their comfort. Could Jesus have calmed the storm from the mountain where He was watching? Yes, but would that have strengthened their faith?

And once He gets in, we are told immediately the winds ceased. Not only so, but John's Gospel tells us they were immediately at the other side. Three miracles – Jesus walking on water, the storm calming, the boat taking a quantum leap.

Their response?

⁵¹ *Then He went up into the boat to them, and the wind ceased. And they were greatly amazed in themselves beyond measure, and marveled.* ⁵² *For they had not understood about the loaves, because their heart was hardened.*

It's hard to convey the strength of the original language. The idea is they were exceedingly, excessively astonished. Their amazement was off the charts. But then, look at verse 52. The Bible does not commend their amazement but seems to show that it came from hearts that were hardened.

It is not that they were wrong for being amazed at Christ's power. They were wrong for being so surprised. They were wrong for not trusting in Christ's promises. What was the lesson of the loaves? What God orders, He pays for. What He requires He supplies. And the same One who supplies what we need when we minister, will also protect and deliver while we serve Him.

If He can feed 5000, He can protect 12 men in a storm. His power over creation is not going to give us our daily bread, and then allow the world to destroy us on the same day.

When John Paton had that chief follow him around for four hours with a loaded musket, this is what he said: “God restrained his hand. I spoke kindly to him, and attended to my work as if he had not been there, fully persuaded that my God had placed me there, and would protect me till my allotted task was finished. Looking up in unceasing prayer to our dear Lord Jesus, I left all in his hands, and felt immortal till my work was done.”

On another occasion, he wrote this, “My constant custom was, in order to prevent war, to run right in between the contending parties. My faith enabled me to grasp and realize the promise, 'Lo, I am with you alway.' In Jesus I felt invulnerable and immortal, so long as I was doing his work. And I can truly say, that these were the moments when I felt my Saviour to be most truly and sensibly present, inspiring and empowering me.”

The hard heart cannot see that Christ knows our storms and prays for us in them. The hard heart does not see Him, even when He is here.

Luke 24:25 *Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken:*

Mark 16:14 *Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen.*

The hard heart does not trust that He will keep His promises and preserve His own.

To soften the heart is to make it childlike. He said He would be with me, and He is. He said He would not forsake me, and He will not. He said all things, including trials, work together for my good, and so they shall. He said no trial will be more than I can bear, and He will make a way of escape.

In other words, God stands behind His own promises. Paton, Taylor, Judson did not do what they did because they were naturally bold. They did what they did by learning the lesson of the loaves – God stands behind His own commands. If He tells you to witness, to stand for the truth, to never compromise, to keep yourself pure, to oppose the opinions of the day, to live counter-culture, to raise your children in a totally different way to the world, then He will be with you. He sees, He prays, and He is present.