

Walking on Water

<i>Text</i>	John 6:16-21 (read 14-21)
<i>Readings</i>	Psalm 107:1-3,23-32,43; 2 Kings 2:1-18
<i>Theme</i>	Jesus walked on water to teach his disciples to trust in him as God's Son.
<i>Purpose</i>	To encourage you to trust in Jesus as the powerful Son of God in all the trials of life.

There is a car bumper sticker that reads; "If you think you are perfect try walking on water." In other words, don't kid yourself that you are almighty. And if you think of yourself too highly then try walking on water – then you'll realise that you are only human like the rest of us! Walking on water is often cited as the definitive test of being super-human. If you can walk on water then you are all-powerful!

In the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* Jesus was brought before Herod who was very interested to see him because he had heard so much about him. But Herod mocked him; in the musical he says:

"So you are the Christ
Yes the great Jesus Christ.
Prove to me that you're no fool
Walk across my swimming pool.
If you do that for me
Then I'll let you go free.
C'mon King of the Jews."

Various people have attempted to walk on water using an assortment of flotation devices, all without success. The disciple Peter walked out on the sea to meet Jesus and managed a short distance, but then became frightened and sank.

Only one person has successfully walked on water and that is the Lord Jesus himself. Today we are going to look at this account of him doing just that.

This miracle is recorded by three of the gospel writers – by Matthew (14:22-36), Mark (6:45-56) and John. John tells it very briefly. He describes it from first-hand experience because he was there. He felt the wind in his hair, and saw the waves breaking into the boat, and with his own eyes he saw the Lord Jesus coming towards them across the water.

As we look at this miracle we will explain the story, then illustrate it from other parts of the Bible, and then apply it: Explanation, Illustration, and Application.

1. Explanation

This story follows immediately after the feeding of the 5000. Jesus had withdrawn from the crowd because they misunderstood what he had come to do and wanted to make him a political king. (verse 15).

We know from the other gospels that it was late in the afternoon by the time the crowd had been fed. Mark tells us that Jesus sent them away (Mark 6:45-46). Jesus told his disciples to go to their boats and to go on without him because he wanted time alone. They left and he went into the mountain to pray. Jesus faced many pressures and temptations from the crowds and from his busyness, so he needed time to be by himself and to pray to his Father in heaven.

The way John tells the story it is possible that Jesus had arranged to meet them along the shore at some point, but had not yet joined them when it became dark. Perhaps they had instructions to leave without him because they set off across the lake for Capernaum.

We read in verse 18: "A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough." The Sea of Galilee was a lake and lay in a basin about 200 metres below sea level. Conditions on the lake could be very changeable. Storms could stir up the lake very quickly as cool air from the mountains came down into the lake. On this occasion a strong wind sprang up and a violent storm churned up the water of the sea.

A number of the disciples were experienced fishermen and were familiar with the conditions of the lake. There is no indication from John that they were afraid of the wind and waves; but they were making hard work of it as they rowed into a head wind and into heavy seas.

Mark tells us that they rowed like this most of the night until the fourth watch – somewhere between 3 and 6 am. But they had only covered 5 or 6 kilometres, which put them about the middle of the lake.

Because they were rowing they were facing towards the stern of their boat, looking back towards the shore they had left.

It was then that they saw this figure walking towards them, across the water! They were terrified, thinking they were seeing a ghost! People don't walk on water; they are too heavy and they sink down. But Jesus was no ordinary man.

He called out to them to reassure them. We do that too if we frighten someone in the dark. We say; "Don't worry, It's me!" Jesus called out to them; "It is I. Don't be afraid." Then they recognised him and were willing to take him into the boat.

"Immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading" (verse 21). The commentators debate on whether this too was a miracle. Some say that this only means that they made their way safely to the shore; others claim that the boat was taken immediately to the other side of the lake.

Another miracle would certainly be a fitting conclusion to the last 24 hours of miracles – the feeding of the 5000, the walking on water, and the immediate and safe arrival of their little boat. Psalm 107 verse 30 described how people cried out to God in a violent storm and he calmed the waves and "guided them to their desired haven." This story is an example of what this psalm described.

2. The Bible contains other **Illustrations** of God's power over the wind and the waves.

The earliest and most striking example in the Bible is the account of the people of Israel crossing **the Red Sea**. They were caught between the sea on the one side and the Egyptian army on the other and they cried out to God for help. The Lord told Moses to lift up his stick over the water and he then sent a strong east wind that drove the sea back and turned it into dry land. The waters of the sea were divided and the people of Israel passed through with a wall of water on their right and on their left. (Exodus 14:21-22).

40 years later there was another miraculous crossing as the people of Israel prepared to go into the promised land of Canaan. They had to get over **the Jordan River** opposite the fortified city of Jericho. The river was in flood making it difficult to cross. The people prepared to cross over and were commanded to follow the priests who walked straight into the fast flowing river. The moment the priests set foot in the water the water upstream stopped flowing! The priests then stood on dry land in the middle of the river bed while all the people went over. (Joshua 3).

Then there was also the crossing of the Jordan by **Elijah and Elisha** just before Elijah was taken to heaven. Elijah struck the water with his coat and the water stopped flowing. Soon after that Elisha crossed back by himself using the same method (2 Kings 2:7-15).

And one more example of God's power over the sea comes from the book of **Jonah**. That reluctant prophet tried to run away from the Lord and went by boat in the opposite direction the Lord had commanded him to go. But God followed him with a great storm on the Mediterranean Sea. Eventually Jonah persuaded the sailors to throw him overboard and immediately the sea became calm.

3. With these other examples in mind let's come back to this account of Jesus walking on the water and consider now how it **Applies To Us**. We will consider two truths about Jesus and then two implications for us.

First of all, this teaches us that Jesus is the **Almighty Creator**.

We usually think of God the Father as the Creator and that is right, but Jesus also had a part in that great work.

In the opening words of this gospel John wrote; "He (that is Jesus) was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made and without him nothing was made that has been made." (John 1:2f).

If everything was made through him and by him and for him then he is all powerful and he can control what he has made. He is the Lord of the wind and the waves. He directs them. He can stir up the sea and can make it calm. He causes the wind to blow and he can make it quiet and still. He is the Creator and the controller of the forces of nature.

Secondly this teaches us that Jesus is **divine** – that is, he is God, he is God’s Son.

We know this because Jesus could do what God did in the Old Testament times. God could part the Red Sea, and dry up the Jordan River, and cause a storm on the Mediterranean Sea and then make it suddenly calm.

In the New Testament Jesus did the same things; he had the same divine power God had. He could even walk across the water as though it were dry land!

Some people don’t believe in this miracle and they want to explain it away. The commentator William Barclay translated the phrase in verse 19, “walking on the water” as “walking by the seashore”. He claims the disciples rowed around the edge of the lake hugging the coastline and then they saw Jesus walking along the shore.

But this doesn’t explain why they were so terrified, nor does it fit with Matthew’s account where he wrote that the boat was a long way from land (Matthew 14:24).

This was a miracle that showed that Jesus was indeed the Son of God.

We also see that in the words of Jesus; “It is I.” In saying this he was identifying himself to them; “don’t worry, it’s me!” Yet, John intends us to see a deeper meaning in these words. This phrase is repeated many times in this gospel by our Lord Jesus. It is used in the seven “I am” statements of Jesus that we find in this gospel: I am the bread of life, I am the door, I am the vine, I am the light of the world, I am the way, the truth and the life, I am the good shepherd, I am the resurrection and the life.

Jesus was no ordinary man walking across the water – he was the Lord “I Am” who had revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush. He was and is the divine Son of God.

These two truths, that Jesus is the Creator and that he is divine, have **two implications** for us in our lives:

First they call you to **believe** in Jesus as God’s Son.

We saw before that William Barclay tried to explain away the miracles of Jesus. Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, also had trouble believing the miracles. He had a leather bound book in which he had pasted all the pages in the Bible that had no miraculous element – a sort of “Readers Digest Condensed Bible”. Towards the end of his life he read from this “Bible” every day. He believed in Jesus the teacher, but not in Jesus the Son of God who could do powerful miracles.

But to only believe in Jesus the teacher is not a genuine faith in Jesus, and it is certainly not a saving faith.

To have saving faith you must believe that Jesus is the all-powerful Son of God, fully divine; “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.” (Nicene Creed)

This sign of the Lord Jesus walking on the water is another testimony that he is indeed the Son of God, almighty and all-powerful.

Is that what you believe? If you do, you have eternal life.

The second implication of Jesus as the divine Creator is that you must **trust him**. Trust is another aspect of faith.

Jesus sent his disciples on ahead of him for a purpose – he wanted to teach them to depend on him and to remind them that he was with them. They were out on the lake for more than six hours, battling against the wind and the waves. Jesus was not physically with them. But he knew what they were doing. He was aware of their situation. He was watching over them. And he went to help them in their struggle. He wanted to teach them that they could trust in him; that he would be there to help them; that they could rely on him.

Jesus wants you and me to learn these same lessons of trust.

Sometimes we are battling against trials and difficulties in our lives. A number of you may be doing that at this time:

- Struggling with ill-health and pain.
- Waiting for surgery
- Facing financial difficulty
- Waiting to hear about a job
- Recovering from an accident
- Settling into a new situation or a new position.

Often we wonder why God allows these troubles and difficulties to come into our lives. But nothing happens by chance. Everything has a purpose, even if we can't see it at the time, or even if we can't see it later!

God is using these trials for your good:

- To strengthen your faith
- To teach patience
- To help you develop perseverance
- To encourage you to look forward in hope
- To wean you off being too attached to the things of this life.

And in everything you go through, in times of prosperity and adversity, our Lord Jesus assures you of his presence. When you are frightened and anxious he says, "It is I". He is with you through his Spirit. He is physically in heaven in his glorified human body, but he is spiritually present with all his people, all the time, in every situation. He is God and so he is omnipresent – he is with us wherever we are and in whatever we are doing.

"It is I" are words that will comfort you in trouble, give you peace in times of anxiety, and bring hope in time of discouragement.

This miracle teaches us that Jesus, the Son of God, who can walk on water, is the almighty Creator and is in control of all the forces of nature.

You can trust in him because he is with you, always, to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

Amen.