JESUS WALKS ON WATER

John 6:14–24

Key Verse: 6:20

“But he said to them, ‘It is I; don’t be afraid.’”

Have you ever heard the Navy Seals’ saying: “The more you sweat in training, the less you bleed in combat”? In life, training makes a huge difference. Without training, musicians can’t play their instruments, surgeons can’t help the sick and wounded, athletes can’t be champions, and armies can’t win battles. Yet even though we know this, it’s still so hard for us to really embrace training. Why? Because our natural tendency is to avoid struggle and hardship. We want everything to just be smooth and easy. In John 6 Jesus turns from testifying to the Jews to training his disciples. Jesus’ training was very simple, yet very deep. What was his point? In feeding the crowd he was training his disciples to actually care about people and have faith in God to do something for them. Now, in walking out to them on the rough sea he’s training his disciples to overcome their fears. Fear causes so many problems in our lives. Often we don’t even know how fearful we are until we’re in a situation. Fear especially cripples us when we have to lead. How can we overcome fear? Through this study may God help us hear our Lord Jesus speaking to us personally.

Today’s passage has several key players: the crowd, the disciples, and Jesus. The story begins and ends with the crowd. Look at verse 14. These people had just experienced the miracle of Jesus feeding them. What did they conclude? They said Jesus was the Prophet who was to come. They were thinking of their historic leader Moses’ words: “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites” (Dt18:15a). They were longing for the Prophet, the deliverer like Moses, to help them get out of all their miseries and from under oppressive Roman rule. But as John 6 tragically shows us, these people didn’t pay careful attention to the last part of Moses’ prediction: “You must listen to him” (Dt18:15b).

Look at verse 15. Jesus perceived how his miracle had affected the people, and it was not in a good way. They intended to come and make him king by force. It means they’d force Jesus to become their leader, force Jesus to join their rebellion against Rome, force Jesus to do for them what they wanted. These people really didn’t understand Jesus; they just wanted to make use of him. Often in life we face people’s pressures to do this or that. What did Jesus do? He withdrew again to a mountain by himself. Mark 6:45,46 says he sent his disciples ahead of him, dismissed the crowd and went up the nearby mountain alone, to pray. Facing these pressures, Jesus needed some personal time to draw close to God, to find his strength, his leading, his wisdom. Likewise, when we face many pressures, we too need to withdraw from everything and everyone and spend time alone in prayer; otherwise, we can’t find out what pleases God (Eph5:10).

Look at verses 16,17. Now the focus turns from the crowd to the disciples. They were heading to Capernaum, where Peter’s house was; it was their base of operations for ministry in Galilee. From where they were now, this boat trip to Capernaum normally would have taken about half an hour. Verse 16 says it was evening, and verse 17 says it was dark. Surely they were tired and wanted to get home as fast as possible. But it’s more than just a time setting; it shows that without Jesus in our lives, things can quickly get dark.

Look at verse 18. The Sea of Galilee is 650 feet below sea level and surrounded by hills. These features make that sea subject to sudden windstorms that cause extremely high waves. Such a stormy sea could be expected, but it was still scary if you got caught in it. Verse 19a says, “When they had rowed about three or four miles…” Mark’s Gospel tells us they were now in the middle of the lake, and that it was close to dawn (Mk6:47,48). So a trip that should’ve taken about 30 minutes had turned into an all-night struggle due to the unexpected storm. Life can still throw us such unforeseen hardships.

In this case, it seems Jesus *wanted* this to happen to his disciples. Why? It was to help them go deeper in their faith. As fishermen, they’d sailed on that sea so many times. They had the skills to do it well. The problem was, they depended on themselves. Normally, we all depend on ourselves to get through life each day. We depend on our natural intelligence, our ability to talk well, our physical health, and we don’t even realize we’re doing it. It works fine in ordinary circumstances, but when things start getting out of control, we freak out. We panic. Why? Because all we had to depend on was ourselves, and as just one human being, we’re way too weak to deal with life’s overwhelming storms.

It’s why we all need training to depend on God. As we learn to truly depend on God each day, faith grows within us, faith that gets us ready for a storm. If we don’t realize how weak we are, how little we depend on God, how limited our strength and abilities are, how fearful we are, we’re not ready to learn the value of faith. Jesus’ training was to let his disciples reach their limits, their utter helplessness, before he began to help them. It was hard, but necessary.

Now the story focuses on Jesus. Look at verse 19b. When they were full of fear, they couldn’t recognize that it was Jesus who’d come out to help them, and that he was walking on the rough waters. Fear blinded them to see Jesus and what he could do. It tells us we can’t overcome our fears on our own; we need God’s help.

How did Jesus help them? Read verse 20. These were very powerful words: “It is I; don’t be afraid.” Sometimes when we’re in the dark and hear noises, we imagine the worst is about to happen. But we’re so comforted when instead, we hear a familiar voice and realize all is well. It’s not just about physical darkness. When we’re right in the middle of a life storm, when everything is confusing and we’re exhausted and helpless and so afraid, that’s the moment we need to hear Jesus’ voice: “It is I; don’t be afraid.”

What do his words mean, and how do they help us? “It is I” doesn’t sound so profound. But in Greek he’s literally saying, “I am.” This is a reference to Exodus 3:14, when God told Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” It’s not an abstract riddle; “It is I” is telling us that Jesus is God. He’s the God who exists in eternity, the God who created all things, the God who is almighty, the God who’s far above this world and all its people and problems, the God who’s the only security, the God who can’t be controlled or manipulated, the God who’s still there for us. We’ve got to stop trying to use God for our own agenda and needs, and simply encounter him. Originally, in the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve had close fellowship with God, and all their blessings flowed from that relationship. It was when they sinned and lost that close fellowship with God that all kinds of ugliness and tragedies resulted. Ever since, fear took root in human souls. Fear keeps us from God. Fear limits us and leads us to foolish choices. Fear makes us irrational and dark and paralyzed.

How can we get out of our fears? When we’re at the end of our rope, our Lord Jesus wants us to hear his voice, “It is I; don’t be afraid.” His words are the only medicine to really cure our fear. People try all kinds of things to overcome their fears. They confront their fears, rationalize their fears, resist their fears with their willpower. It may help a bit, but these efforts are so limited. Only when we meet the living God personally and hear his voice can we truly overcome our fears from the root. We don’t like it, but our most desperate, helpless moments are the best time to meet him.

How did the disciples respond? Look at verse 21a. Without his words, they were too scared of him, but when they heard his words, “It is I; don’t be afraid,” they were willing to take him into the boat with them. It has another deep meaning for us. Jesus is God who can help us even in the worst storm, but we’ve got to be willing to let him into our life boat. We’ve got to open our hearts to him. We’ve got to let him steer our boat, take control, and lead us. If we’re constantly trying to control everything, trying to have things our way, Jesus can’t help us. To let him into our life boat means to really trust him and let him be in control.

What happened when the disciples did that? Look at verse 21b. What had seemed impossible became immediately possible with Jesus. With Jesus in their boat everything became so simple. It has yet another message for us. When we’re trying too hard, using all our abilities and efforts, we get anxious and make things complicated. On the other hand, when we’re depending on Jesus from our hearts, everything becomes simple and peaceful. But it’s not natural; it takes training to really be like that.

At the end of the passage the focus turns again to the crowd. Read verses 22–24. This crowd was searching for Jesus. They didn’t know how he got away from them that night. But they weren’t searching for him in faith; they were just desperate. They didn’t really know who he was.

Today we saw how Jesus trained his disciples to overcome their fears. Without his training they would have just followed the pressures of the world and of people. They would not have been able to follow in his footsteps and carry on his work. We don’t naturally like training. But may God help us to see how he’s trying to train us, so that we can really meet him, overcome our fears, and let him into our life boat. May God help us to hear Jesus’ words: “It is I; don’t be afraid.”