

The Third Test of Faith on the Sea

Rev. David Lipsy

Psalter: 260

Scripture: Matthew 14:22–36

(Mark 6:45–56, John 6:14–21)

Psalter: 2

Sermon Text: Matthew 14:22–36

Psalter: 184

Twice the disciples had their faith tested on the Sea of Galilee. The first test was when Jesus began to call those whom He would make apostles—Peter, James, and John. Remember that time, children? Simon was told to launch out into the deep and let down the nets for a draught. You remember now, right? And Simon answered, “Master, we have toiled all the night and have taken nothing: nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net.” When they had done this, they caught such a great multitude of fish that their net broke.

Perhaps that was a little test compared with other ones, but it was the first. Would they rely on their knowledge and experience as fishermen or would they obey Christ’s command contrary to what they thought? They obeyed, and the Lord richly blessed their obedience.

The second test of faith on the sea was a great deal more serious and dangerous. You remember, right, children? They were sailing on the Sea of Galilee and Jesus was asleep in the ship when a great storm arose. The apostles were terrified, thinking they would all drown. They awoke Jesus and said unto him, “Master, carest thou not that we perish?” That was the time Jesus rebuked the wind and the sea and made it calm. That

astonished the apostles—that He had such power and authority. But even though that second test was far more serious than the first, at least Jesus was with them.

This morning we're going once again to the Sea of Galilee and once again the apostles will be tested. But this time they will be alone without Jesus.

Beloved, sometimes there are trials in a believer's life where that believer is comforted by the Lord's goodness, even in the midst of the trouble or trial. But there are other times, aren't there? Times when it seems Jesus is nowhere to be found. Times when we feel like Job did when he said, "Behold, I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I cannot perceive him." Such storms in life can be the very hardest to endure, for it's one thing to go through a deep trial *with* the Lord but quite something else when it seems from all appearances that we're going through this one alone.

Our text is Matthew 14:22–36. The parallel accounts can be found in Mark 6:45–56 and John 6:14–21. Let's read again together Matthew 14:25, "And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea."

1. *Praying and rowing*
2. *Walking and sinking*
3. *Running and healing*

Setting

The disciples had just witnessed the miraculous feeding of the five thousand men, not counting women and children. They were actually involved in that miracle, as they were told by Jesus to distribute the bread and fish He had multiplied and to gather the remains.

It is John who tells us the reaction of the people who witnessed this: "Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world (John 6:14).

This appears to be a clear reference to that mysterious prophecy God gave in Moses' day about the prophet who would one day come—like unto Moses, but of tremendous authority so that the Lord issues a dire warning to those who would not heed Him.

John then tells us where the people wanted to take this (v. 15): “Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force to make him a king.” The people were thinking, “Here is one who can take care of us. If we follow Him, we'll have all that we need for our daily lives. We won't be dependent on the Romans anymore, for this Jesus seems to have the power needed to throw off the yoke of Rome.” And we must not forget that the apostles thought this way, too, as evidenced by the mother of James and John asking that her sons might occupy the places of honor in the kingdom they thought Jesus would set up—and the apostles, even after Jesus' resurrection, asking if He at *that* time would restore the kingdom to Israel.

But this is not at all what Jesus came to the earth to do. This would not be the nature of His kingdom, and the same is true today, beloved. This whole notion that if a person had enough faith they would be healthy through multiple faith-healings, affluent by believing that God wants the best (in earthly terms) for His children, and would be protected from all kinds of difficulties is false. To borrow from the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 14:17, “The kingdom of God is not meat and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.” Knowing God, union with Christ, holy living, and the blessings that flow from such things—this is what the kingdom is all about.

Jesus, knowing what the people were thinking, “...straightway constrained his disciples to get into the ship and to go to the other side before unto Bethsaida, while he sent away the people” (Mark 6:45). John adds this detail, “When Jesus therefore perceived that they

would come and take him by force to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone.” Matthew and Mark inform us that Jesus went to that mountain alone to pray.

1. Praying and rowing

As Jesus saw what was developing, He did something that must have seemed strange to the apostles—He compelled them to enter the ship and sail to the other side of the sea without Him. Why do this? Did the Savior not want them near to Him? Why would He want to dismiss the multitudes Himself? Why shouldn't they help Him do it? And how would Jesus join them if they sail across without Him? He had no boat of His own, so would He walk around this large body of water? Yes, all of this must have seemed so strange, especially the fact that Matthew and Mark both use the word “constrained”—He urged them, compelled them to go on without Him.

So again, in obedience to Him, they begin across the sea once more. The last time they went He was with them and that's when the storm came. But, in any event, they do as He commands, and Jesus, after sending the people home, goes up a mountain alone and prays.

Beloved, this is so instructive for us in several ways. First, we remind ourselves that this is God on the mountain, God the Son. In one sense, Jesus didn't need to pray, for being God meant He needed nothing, for all is His. But, on the other hand, Jesus came to earth as a mediator on our behalf. So there He was, praying. We are not told for what He prayed or even what He said—just that He prayed. Here is our great High Priest, undoubtedly glorifying His Father but also interceding for His disciples and us His people. Perhaps that heart of compassion which was moved for the multitudes was pouring out prayer also for the elect among them, too.

But secondly, we see that our Lord valued private prayer. With all that had to be done in His relatively brief

time on earth, we see that a good part of that time was spent in prayer. It can be so tempting for each of us, because of our many responsibilities, to minimize our times of prayer alone with God. But I think we would be pretty hard pressed to realistically say any of us are busier than the Lord Jesus was each day or that the work we're doing is somehow more important or more pressing than His. There He was praying, and the context suggests for several hours.

The disciples were not aware He was praying. No one else appears to have been able to know He was. But our God wanted us to know it. That is why He had it recorded in the gospels—for our benefit and encouragement. Beloved, if our Savior could pray several hours that His Father would be glorified and that those for whom He died would be helped as well as that His Father would help Him to do what He came into the world to do, all of which we can surmise from the kind of prayer we find in John 17, then surely we ought to be able to set aside time to pray for the glory of our heavenly Father, for others needing prayer, and that we would be better fitted by the Lord for our callings.

“When evening was come, he was there alone,” Matthew tells us. He goes on to say what was happening with the disciples at this time. “But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary.” John adds that “the sea arose by reason of a great wind that blew.” We don't know if this storm was as grave as the last one they experienced when Jesus was asleep in the ship, but at the very least it must have reminded them of that except that this time Jesus was not with them. At least He wasn't with them in the ship. We'll revisit that thought later.

John 6:19 informs us that the disciples had gone between three and four miles from shore. Matthew says they were in the midst of the sea. One can only imagine what went through their minds. Here they were, once

more, where the Lord told them to go. And now again they meet with trouble, except that now Jesus was nowhere to be seen.

Beloved, can you relate to this experience? You are doing what the Lord would have you do the best you can. For some reason it doesn't seem that the Lord is near as before. Devotions are a bit more mechanical and church seems like duty; you might still pray but not as lively as you once did. And now, trying to do the will of God, the storm comes down. You are rowing and rowing but no shore is in sight. You've tried all that you know how to try but to no avail, and now you're in the storm without any sense of Jesus' presence.

We don't know if the disciples prayed; we would hope so. We know they were rowing, toiling to make headway. But clearly it appeared they were unable to overcome the wind. And now there's no Jesus in the boat to say, "Peace, be still." There are times in our storms that we really don't see how it can go well. Encouragements aren't appearing anywhere, despite all that we're trying to do. So we row and we look for Jesus.

These are hard moments, aren't they? So often our sins from the past come back to us at times like this. We see how we've been so unfaithful to the Lord and now, when we're in need, we almost feel guilty asking the Lord for help. But we must not let Satan persuade us not to pray.

Thanks be to God, the disciples weren't alone. Even though they were between three to four miles from shore, Mark tells us something so sweet—"And he saw them toiling in rowing." Mind you, it was already evening. They were miles away. It wasn't like they were in a large ship that could be easily spotted. But Jesus saw them working hard to row to some shore, row to safety. Beloved, the same is true today. Jesus sees you. You could almost imagine Jesus turning during prayer—His eyes scanning the Sea of Galilee. There they are. It's going so hard for them.

Our great High Priest ever lives to make intercession for us to God, but that doesn't mean His eyes are closed to us when He prays. He is praying and watching, praying and watching. What a comfort! But it is not a comforting thought that Jesus is watching us if we're consciously not living the way we know pleases Him, living in some sin. How grievous if that is the case! Knowing that He sees us but acting as if He was far, far away and did not see.

By this time in history, the Romans had divided the night into four parts, each of which was three hours long. Each segment was called a "watch." The Jews had done so earlier, but they divided the night into three four-hour sections. So according to the Roman division, used in Jesus' day, the first watch would be from 6 to 9 p.m., the second from 9 p.m. to midnight, the third from midnight to 3 a.m., and the fourth watch from 3 a.m. to 6 in the morning. Mark tells us that after Jesus saw them toiling in rowing, "about the fourth watch of the night He cometh unto them." They had been rowing for hours. We can't imagine that Jesus sent the multitude away after it was dark or that the disciples would have taken ship to cross the sea near to night. So it is likely that at the very least they were rowing six hours and perhaps as much as nine or more. And after all that, they had only come about halfway across.

About the fourth watch of the night, He came to them. In the midst of their exhaustion, perhaps near despondency, He came. He came to them in a way no one ever had done before. He came to them on the boisterous waves and made clear headway as if the waves were a smooth path for His feet. Mark adds the fascinating words that He "would have passed by them." They were rowing as good fishermen do. Jesus walked. In six to nine hours, they made it only so far. But He was about to pass them. Children, Jesus had no ship, no sails, no oars—He walked.

One can only imagine how terrified the apostles were when they spotted this *person* walking on the waves!

Matthew 14:26 says, “And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit, and they cried out for fear.” Mark adds, “They all saw him and were troubled.” This figure on the water—would it pass or confront them? There was already a sense among many Jews that the Sea of Galilee was a foreboding place, especially at night, because of the dangers. So the disciples were already tired, weary, undoubtedly discouraged—and now *this*. Would this specter approaching them seal their doom? Where was the Lord when they needed Him the most?

When we are weary, despondent, exhausted, and alone, we too might fear that Satan himself is about to overwhelm us in our woe. It can be so dark, so stormy, so seemingly hopeless, and now there is one more frightening development on top of all else. We too cry out!

2. Walking and sinking

The apostles’ cry of fear did not go unanswered. In Mark 6:50 we read, “And immediately he talked with them and saith unto them, Be of good cheer: it is I; be not afraid.” The Lord spoke to them and said three things. First, “Be of good cheer,” i.e., be encouraged or take courage. The third thing He said was, “Be not afraid.” But the *second* thing He said reads in English, “It is I.” In the Greek it is literally, “I am.” “Be of good cheer. I am. Do not fear.” Of course, “I am” can rightly be translated, “It is I.” But there are simply too many “I am” passages associated with Jesus in the gospels to think this was merely meant to communicate, “It’s me.”

What is interesting and important is the Lord comforts them with Himself. He doesn’t promise them anything. Doesn’t rebuke the wind or the sea this time. The storm hadn’t ended, but He fixes their hopes on who He is—the “I am.” Beloved, is not this the deepest source of comfort we could have in the midst of all our woes—to know that the great “I am” is here? And He is here! He

promised it in His Word. To those who are looking to Him by faith, He promises never to leave you, never to forsake you, storms notwithstanding.

If we compare the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we find out that Jesus did not immediately enter the ship. Something happened first. But before we look at that something, just pause to think about this moment. The storm wasn't over yet. The waves were still mounting up. It was still dark, being only the fourth watch of the night. The wind was still howling and making it difficult to row. But Jesus was above the waves. He fixed their faith on Him as though to bid them not to regard the storm anymore. He told them to be of good cheer and not be afraid even though in the very moment the storm was just as fierce as it was before.

This is the Christian life. The Christian life isn't about miraculous healings. It isn't about miracles. It isn't about the Lord solving all our problems and providing all we ask Him for. It's about how we live our lives before the face of God and others. It's about the Lord being with us each day in every situation. It's about having faith in the Lord being with us in every situation. It's about living in the reality that the Lord is with us in every situation. It is even dying with the reality that, even then, the Lord will be with us.

So the storm continued, but Jesus was there. Peter, in a hard-to-explain request, says to Jesus, "Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water." First of all, it does not appear this request of Peter's was born of faith. The Lord said, "I am." Peter replied, "*If* it be thou...." Peter should let the word of the Lord be the final say. We do not need to ask for signs and wonders if God's Word speaks. We don't need to pray about something if God already gives us clear direction about it from His Word.

But let's give Peter the benefit of the doubt that he made this request because he was just so afraid of being deceived by the evil one. What a request he makes! We

just observed how no one had ever walked on water. The closest thing we have to that is the prophet Elisha causing an axe head to swim. But no sooner did Peter see Jesus do this, he himself would do it, too.

We see such patience on Jesus' part with respect to this somewhat unusual request of His impetuous disciple, Simon Peter. "Come," Jesus says to him. Peter climbs down out of the ship in the pitch dark in stormy seas and begins to walk on the water! Did not Jesus say that faith could move mountains? When the Lord calls us, beloved, we can go anywhere. We can go to dangerous Muslim nations to bring the gospel. We can go to frightful Communist countries with the gospel. We can even speak with our difficult neighbor or child or spouse! Here Peter not only obeyed but he also believed. If Jesus said to come, Peter would come, no questions asked. And so he did, himself now risen above the storm. As long as the eyes of faith trusted in Jesus and not in wind or water or physics, Peter would be fine.

Have you ever walked on water as your faith locked onto Jesus Christ? Though winds and waves wrapped about your senses, pain gnawed within, and circumstances felt as if they would crush you and sink you, did that faith catch hold of the words of the Savior and uphold you, keep you from sinking, fill you with wonder, give you to stay above it all even while having to go through it all?

In Matthew 14:30, we read, "But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me." Beloved, do you remember the last storm on the sea? Jesus pointed out a relationship between fear and faith. So it is in this history as well. As long as Peter's faith embraced Jesus and His command to come, the apostle was fine. But as soon as he began to observe the wind, he began to be afraid and so began to sink. Faith sees through the storm; fear sees nothing but the storm. Faith keeps our head above water;

fear sinks it beneath the waves. Faith credits God's Word to be true; fear says, "I'm not so sure it is." Faith honors and pleases God; fear dishonors and displeases Him.

But even as Peter was sinking, his faith came up for air, crying to Jesus. If Peter had absolutely no faith in this moment, why cry out? "What could Jesus do?" would be the language of absolute unbelief. But faith was weak and so Peter's cry was strong—"Lord, save me!" It is better to have a quiet, steady faith keeping us near to Christ daily than to have a waxing and waning faith that has to cry out often in fear. Yet it is better to have a weak faith than no faith at all, for then all there will be in the storm is winds and waves and fear.

In verse 31, we read, "And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" Jesus is strong enough to keep Himself and Peter above the surface. He's strong enough to keep all His children above the waves. He's strong enough to hold you, even if you have but a little faith. Jesus didn't accuse Peter of having no faith—just little faith. And again Jesus chides Peter for doubting. Doubting what? His own ability to walk on water? No, of course not. Doubting that winds and waves are a dangerous place to walk? No. Doubting Jesus. Jesus would not have Peter to doubt Him.

Beloved, Jesus would not have any of us doubt Him either. It is really a shame to doubt God the Son, Jesus Christ.

In verse 32, we read, "And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased." The Master was there and so the storm ends. We don't read that Jesus commanded the wind and waves this time. It just stopped as soon as He was there with them. What does this mean? It means storms last only as long as God has a use for them. Once the lessons were taught and learned, the trial ended. Not only does our Lord have control over all things, but His infinite wisdom puts all things to the best use in the best

time with the best duration for the best purposes. We can trust Him with how long our storms need to last.

“Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God.” This is worship and this is faith, beloved—acknowledging God to be who He really is. Faith honors Him greatly. Sadly, however, this wasn’t all that happened at this time. In Mark 6, we read, “They were sore amazed in themselves beyond measure and wondered. For they considered not the miracle of the loaves: for their heart was hardened.” Why do we keep acting surprised when God does what He says He will do? He has proven His Word so many times in our lives; yet it seems with almost every new challenge, fear flees and doubts rise. Let us prayerfully fight against this, what Scripture is calling a hardened heart. Let us remember the Word and works of the Lord and trust in Him!

3. Running and healing

In Matthew 14:34, we read, “When they were gone over, they came into the land of Gennesaret.” Gennesaret, also known as Chinnereth, was a region southwest of Capernaum across the Galilee. Jesus and the apostles drew near to shore there. But it’s interesting to note what John writes about the rest of their journey to that place. After they willingly received Him into the ship we are told, “immediately the ship was at the land whither they went.” John is saying they went from the middle to the end of their journey right away, in an instant. So we have yet another miracle here. Jesus didn’t have to take over the rowing from these tired men. He but had to will it and the ship was at the shore.

Beloved, so will the ship of our lives be—in one instant, believers will exchange the stormy sea, the rowing and toiling, for the calm shore of eternal glory. But, in that same brief instant, the unbelieving and unsaved will

also suddenly find themselves on a shore of wretchedness called hell.

Seeing it was the fourth watch that Jesus came to them, and they arrived immediately at the shore to which they traveled, it was still early morning when they arrived. In Mark 6:54 and what follows, we read, "And when they were come out of the ship, straight-way they knew him and ran through that whole region round about." Matthew 14:35 says it this way: "When the men of that place had knowledge of him, they sent out into all that country round about." So some recognized Jesus when He left the ship for shore and they ran to tell others who, when they heard, sent messages all over. Messages about what, we might ask? Matthew is somewhat brief, writing, "And brought unto him all that were diseased; and besought him that they might only touch the hem of his garment." Mark is a bit more expansive: "And began to carry about in beds those that were sick, where they heard he was. And whithersoever he entered, into villages or cities or country they laid the sick in the streets and besought him that they might touch if it were but the border of his garment."

What a sight this must have been! The one carrying the other, people calling out, reaching out, beseeching Him that they might but touch His garment. Sick and crippled and troubled folk from all over coming to Jesus. And the result of all this? "And as many as touched were made perfectly whole." Picture a cripple comes to Jesus and he is able to walk away. Another comes coughing and wheezing and walks away strong and healthy. Perhaps a leper comes and leaves a cleansed man. Another maybe came unable to see and leaves with sight. Wasn't there one person, just one, who came to Jesus and went away disappointed? Unaffected? Not cured? No, not even one! "As many as touched were made perfectly whole." Well, if that's the case with all manner of bodily disease, why

would anyone doubt that the same would happen with spiritual maladies?

Has there ever been a poor, broken sinner who came to Jesus who went away disappointed? Unaffected? Not cured? No, not one. And this blessed fountain of cleansing is still open. Whether it's for the first time or the ten thousandth time, come to this precious Savior and be cleansed of all your sins, your guilt and shame removed afresh. Faith, not sight, brings us to Him. So you must not look on how awful a person you might see yourself to be. Look rather on Him, so that you too might touch the hem of His garment and be made perfectly whole. Perfectly whole.

Have you no need of this Physician of souls? Are you satisfied with how you are, with your portion in the world? Your case is far sadder, far worse than the most diseased one who came to Jesus that day on the shore. They saw their need and came to Him, looking for His healing power. And are you so lifeless spiritually that you don't even see the need of Him? Repent of this hardness of heart and seek Him immediately.

Look to Jesus as the only hope for lost sinners and born-again saints alike. Blessed is the man, woman, or child who looks by faith upon Jesus Christ and trusts in Him—His ability, His willingness, His power, His compassion, His blood. "Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, whose hope the Lord is."