

1Stepping out of the boat
Matthew 14:22-33

David Campbell

The first thing that strikes us about this story is how Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of Him (verse 22). What God tells us to do is sometimes hard to understand. The meeting was still going on – why would Jesus dismiss the disciples before He dismissed the crowd? And why would He tell them to leave without Him? He had no way of getting to the place the disciples were headed to. But they did what Jesus told them to do. That is the first lesson of walking with the Lord. We do not come armed with smart responses or reasoned-out answers; we come armed with obedience. We may think we know what is happening, but God sees a bigger picture than we do. His wisdom is always proved right. How many times have we hesitated to do what He told us, yet looked back and acknowledged He knew what He was doing? We always want to help God out by doing things our own way and we find it difficult to trust Him. Notice, however, that Jesus had no hesitation in obeying the Father, even though His dismissing of the disciples meant He had no way of getting to His destination. He obeyed, and trusted God to provide the solution.

The second thing that strikes us is the reason Jesus sent them away. It was the only way He had of having time alone with the Father (verse 23). Even great fellowship, or in this case, the performing of miracles (the feeding of the five thousand), can get in the way of time with God. For Jesus, the most important thing was to have time with His Father. Jesus was not prepared to let even the good get in the way of the best. We spend a lot of time planning how to get ahead in life and get everything done. But what if we invested a portion of our time in seeking God instead, asking Him for His direction and waiting to see what He does? My experience is that God is the greatest efficiency expert there is. Our time is His time, and He wants it used wisely. Asking God how to do things will save you time and money, and it will lead to much better results than doing it your way.

The third thing we notice in this story is that God always has a way of getting us where He wants us to be. The only condition is that first we submit ourselves to His will. If it were us, we would have taken off as soon as the weather started looking bad. We would have lined up that boat and set sail. Yet God told Jesus to do the opposite. As evening fell and the winds rose, God told Him to go and spend some hours alone in prayer. The important thing for Jesus was not to reason or argue, but to obey. If we obey, the door is opened for His provision. We spend so much time, even as Christians, trying to provide security for ourselves. But are we prepared to give away our human security if God calls us to, and to become completely dependent only on Him? Such a radical decision, while making no sense to those around us, is what is required if the greater supply of God is to be opened up to us. It always takes the supernatural supply of God to walk fully in the supernatural will of God. We cannot walk in human strength or wisdom and do everything God has called us to do. Often the only way to walk in His security is first to set aside our own. Jesus commanded the rich young man to sell all he had (Matt. 19:21) not because He was against the possession of material goods, but because the young man's wealth was a hindrance to Him following Christ. Simon and his brother Andrew still owned a house even after they began to follow Jesus (Mark 1:29) – yet they too had to pay a price in giving up

the human security of their business income. But Jesus read the young man's heart, and knew that because he found his security in his wealth, his wealth had to go in order for him to find his security in God instead. That day in Galilee, Jesus knew He had to find some way of getting to the other side of the lake. Instead of getting in the boat, which was the human supply available to Him, He obeyed the Father and sent the boat away. But because He gave up the human security, God opened a far greater door to Him. Walking in our own strength will always get us a certain distance, but to enter into all God has for us requires us to give up our own strength and resources in order to walk in His instead. Anyone can walk on land – but how many can walk on water!

So in the fourth watch of the night (between 3 and 6 am), the disciples found themselves in the middle of the lake fighting the wind and the heavy waves, and making slow headway (verse 24). Suddenly they saw Jesus coming to them, walking on the water (verse 25). Jesus had found His provision from God. Having given up all human means of getting across the lake, He found God's supernatural means of getting there instead. God will never leave us stranded. If He wants us to do something or go somewhere, He guarantees to find a way for us to do it. There is a joy in leaving our own security behind and seeing God supply. The disciples were terrified by the sight of Jesus, thinking they were seeing a ghost (verse 26). But Jesus called out to them to reassure them, and told them not to fear (verse 27). It is amazing how the presence of Jesus brings the absence of fear!

The next thing that happens is very interesting. Peter called out to Jesus, “*Lord, if it is You, command me to come to you on the water*” (verse 28). The phrase “if it is You” is in Greek what is called a “real condition”, and the meaning is actually, “Lord, *since* it is You”. So Peter said, “Since it's You, command me to come”. What he means is that because Jesus has arrived, we can automatically presume that miracles are about to happen. Since it's Him, we can ask for anything. We should never underestimate what Jesus can do. When we touch Jesus, we touch the supernatural power of God. Peter had by this point walked with Jesus long enough to know that when He showed up, anything could happen. For all his failures and character flaws, which continued right up until the time of the crucifixion, Peter had learned how to enter into the exercise of faith. He had faith that because Jesus was there, anything was possible. He had faith that because Jesus did something – in this case, walk on water – he could do it too. Isn't that what Jesus had taught His disciples back in chapter 10? Matthew tells us, “*Having summoned His twelve disciples, He gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness*” (Matt. 10:1). And they got the job done (Mark 6:13)!

But faith is only one half of this story. If faith was all that was involved, then Peter would simply have got out of the boat and started to walk. But he didn't. He asked Jesus to command him. Peter did not presume to be able to step out without God's permission. I believe that Peter knew it was possible for him to do it. That wasn't the issue. The critical point for him was that *Jesus wanted him to do it*. If faith is one half of the reason why Peter was able to get out of the boat, obedience was the other half. Peter had learned to listen to his Master's voice. I believe it all started back at the sea of Galilee, back at the very beginning, the day that Jesus got into Peter's boat and began to teach. He told Peter to let down his nets for a catch. Peter replied, “*Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but because you say so I will let down*

the nets” (Luke 5:5). Peter was a professional fisherman. He knew when and where to catch the fish. He had done all the right things that night and the fact is there were no fish. Yet now Jesus, who was a carpenter and not a fisherman, was telling him to let down the nets in a place where he knew there were no fish and to do so in daylight, at the worst time for fishing even if there were fish. But because he heard Jesus telling him to do it, he did it, and a miracle happened – so much so, that when he saw the extent of the catch, he fell down at Jesus’ feet and said, “*Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!*”” (Luke 5:8). Peter was attuned to the voice of Jesus. His question was, “Has Jesus said so?” How many of us are so attuned to the Holy Spirit that we are willing to attempt the humanly impossible if the Lord tells us to do it? And equally, how many of us are so attuned to the Lord’s voice that we would be willing to give up what we want to do or think we should do, even in the name of faith, because we are not sure that God has truly given us permission to do it? For Peter that night out on the stormy lake, the question of authority was cut and dried. Jesus was standing right in front of him. And so he asked Him. And what Jesus told him to do, that is what he did. Obedience, Hebrews 10:5-9 reminds us, is better than sacrifice. God is not looking for people who do their own thing and then clothe it in a religious veneer. He is looking for people who will hear His voice and obey it.

But how do we, who don’t have Jesus standing in front of us, discern what He is saying to us? The answer comes in several forms. God speaks to us in His Word and through prayer. He speaks through the prophetic and even through unusual circumstances. And He speaks through human authorities He has placed over us. That means elders, parents, husbands, even police officers, judges, teachers and, God save us, governments! Charismatic folk often come to grief because they have a “word from God” which they are going to follow, no matter whether they have prayed about it, understood whether it is in line with Scripture, is confirmed by circumstances or is in line with what anyone in authority tells them to do – if there is anyone in authority they would submit to anyway! And then they wonder why things don’t work out. These are people who value sacrifice – religious activities – over true obedience, lone rangers who will not let anyone question what they are doing. Years ago, Elaine and I had friends who came to complete grief in their lives and marriage because they insisted they had a call to the mission field when the elders of their church were pleading with them not to go – and for good reason. When we questioned them, we were told we were proud and should humble ourselves. They went because they had the human resources to go. They went in apparent faith – but not in obedience. And they paid a heavy price. One later repented, got right with God and is serving Him to His glory today. The other, to our knowledge, never did. We want to be a people who listen to Jesus’ voice, and obey it.

What got Peter out of the boat and into the water, therefore, was the powerful combination of obedience and faith. Notice how Paul described the entire goal of his life to be to call people to the “obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5). True faith will always be directed by obedience, and true obedience will always express itself in acts of faith. It worked that day for Peter. But can it work for us who, unlike Peter, do not have Jesus standing right in front of us to tell us what to do? I believe it can work, and the subsequent record of Peter’s own life proves it. Several years later, Peter was in Jerusalem. Jesus had died and been resurrected, and had ascended into heaven. He was no longer there for Peter to ask. The Holy Spirit had been given at Pentecost, and so now Peter was in exactly the same position as you and I are today. Peter was going with John to the temple to pray (Acts 3:1), as he had done countless times before. On this occasion,

as on every other day (verse 2), a beggar was there, gathering alms. But this day something different happened. Peter had looked at the man often, but this day he “fixed his gaze” on him. This is a strong word (*atenizo*), with a meaning something like the word *skopeo* in 2 Cor. 4:18, where, using our spiritual vision, we “fix our eyes” on the things which are not seen by the natural eye. The same word is used in Acts 6:15, where the members of the Sanhedrin “fixed their gaze” on Stephen’s angelic face, and in Acts 11:6, where Peter “fixed his gaze” on the vision of the unclean animals being let down from heaven. The Holy Spirit had arrested Peter’s attention as he looked at the beggar. Peter knew God could heal the beggar – all he needed was permission to do it. Now, by the witness of the Spirit, he knew he had that permission. He heard the voice of Jesus as sure as he had heard it that day on Galilee, and faith and obedience joined together in the power of the Spirit to make the miracle unfold. “*I do not possess silver and gold*”, said Peter. That is, “I don’t have any security or provision in myself.” “*But what I do have,*” he continued – that is, the provision and power he had in Christ, “*I give to you: “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!”*” (Acts 3:6).

If you were paying close attention to the text, you would notice there’s one detail we passed over in our story. Peter did get out of the boat and he did walk on the water toward Jesus, but something went wrong: “*Seeing the wind, he became afraid, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’*” (Matt. 14:30). His faith was strong enough to get him out of the boat, but weakened as he took his eyes off Jesus and placed them on the storm instead. Faith is a process. It is not good enough just to start out. We have to persevere. Sometimes the storm does not die down just because we have taken a step of faith and seen God provide. Jesus said to Peter, “*O you of little faith, why did you doubt?*” (verse 31). The word little” does not mean “small” so much as “of poor quality”. Jesus said faith as small as a mustard seed would move a mountain (Matt. 17:20). But the quality of our faith has to be consistent. Peter’s faith in stepping out on the water seems pretty big to us! But Jesus says that faith which starts out but does not persevere is faith of poor quality and will not get us where we need to go. How is that faith developed? By keeping our eyes on Jesus, not on the storm. The longer we have our eyes on Him, the stronger and better in quality our faith gets. How easy it is, especially when we have enjoyed a little success, to forget the One who gave it. Such was the downfall of King Uzziah, who became proud of his successes and wound up a leper (2 Chron. 26). How easy it is, when God has helped us, to assume the trial is over and to resume the default position of relying on our own strength instead. Such was Peter’s mistake that day. Yet Jesus honoured the faith he did have, and stretched out His hand and saved him. There was hope for Peter, and there is hope for us.

One more thing. When they got into the boat, the wind stopped (verse 32). But that is not how the account ends. The final verse of the passage says this: “*And those who were in the boat worshipped Him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God!’*” (verse 33). The miracle is not the climax of the story. No miracle should ever be the climax of the story of our faith. The climax is the glory of God.

When faith joined with obedience becomes the default position of our life, we too will start walking on the water – whatever that involves – and we too, like Peter and Jesus that day, will get to the place God intends us to reach. And our story, too, will end in the glory of God.