

Chapter 58: Salvation from the Son of God

Matthew 14:22–36

Jesus has been moving in and out of crowds. He taught the crowds throughout Matthew 13, but then he sought to escape the crowds after hearing of the death of John the Baptist (Matt. 14:13). Still, those crowds wanted to be around Jesus, so that they sought him out, and he healed them (Matt. 14:14). Furthermore, Jesus refused to send the crowds away to find food, but miraculously fed the 5,000 men (along with women and children) who had followed him. Now that this miracle is over, Jesus will once again seek solitude, even from his disciples (Matt. 14:22). Just when we might think that Jesus is ready to take advantage of some well deserved rest and relaxation by himself, we see that Jesus is needed once again. Will he rise to the occasion to rescue his disciples? In Matthew 14:22–36, we see yet one more example of Jesus’ tireless dedication to his people, since *Jesus saves us from storms*.

Salvation from the Storm (Matt. 14:22–27)

After the miracle of feeding the 5,000, Matthew records an abrupt conclusion to the day’s ministry: “Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds” (v. 22). Jesus did not linger with the crowds; he *immediately* sent them away. Jesus did not suggest that his disciples head out; Matthew says that Jesus “made” them go. Nolland writes that the word “made” could alternately be translated “forced/compelled/urged/insisted,” noting that this “is a strong term not used elsewhere of Jesus (cf. its use in a parable in Lk. 14:23: ‘compel the people to come in’).”¹ Jesus’ solitude had been interrupted, but, after the conclusion of that day’s ministry, Jesus insists upon solitude again.

Why does Jesus so abruptly transition all the people away, including both the crowds and his disciples? Some commentators have pointed to John’s detail that the crowd sought to make Jesus king after he fed the five thousand (John 6:15). On this basis, they suggest that Jesus’ insistence that all must leave is to avoid becoming the wrong kind of king—an political king taking his throne by power rather than a messianic king establishing his throne through the cross. These commentators also explain Jesus’ command for his disciples to leave by the (plausible) suggestion that the disciples would have eagerly gone along with the scheme. While these explanations would fit with the narrative Matthew gives us, France is right to dismiss this interpretation as “reading between the lines on the basis of John’s account.”²

In the context of the Gospel of Matthew, two different explanations stand out: (1) Jesus returned to his grieving the loss of John the Baptist, which had been interrupted (Matt. 14:13); and (2) Jesus specifically wanted to devote himself to prayer (v. 23). If we observed in the previous passage that

¹ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 598.

² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 568.

Jesus sets an example for how we ought to handle grief, here we see a further example set for us in Jesus' dedication to solitary prayer: "We know how easily the slightest interruptions destroy the ardor of prayer, or at least make it languish and cool. Though Christ was in no danger of this fault, yet he intended to warn us by his example, that we ought to be exceedingly careful to avail ourselves of every assistance for setting our minds free from all the snares of the world, that we may look direct towards heaven."³ Matthew does not tell us precisely what Jesus prayed about here, but only that Jesus prayed well into the night. Yet, elsewhere we are told that Jesus' intercessory prayer is directly connected with our salvation: "Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). Should we not think that Jesus is here praying for the salvation of his disciples as they head into this storm?

During this time, the disciples' boat was "beaten" by the waves, "a word that elsewhere can refer to demonic hostility against people (Matt 8:6; Rev 9:5)."⁴ The disciples had sailed some distance from the shore, but they struggled in the face of the wind that came up against them (v. 24). Then, during the fourth watch of the night (i.e., from 3 to 6 in the morning),⁵ Jesus came to his disciples, "walking on the sea" (v. 25). This is an extraordinary detail, and yet Matthew writes with a stylistic understatement that makes the miracle all the more striking. Rather than editorializing on the event, Matthew simply recounts the reaction of the disciples: "when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, 'It is a ghost!' and they cried out in fear" (v. 26).

In the previous passage, Jesus created a need for the disciples in telling them to feed the five thousand. Now, Jesus again creates a need for his disciples by walking on water. They are terrified by the sight, but once again Matthew includes the word "immediately: "But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid" (v. 27). As Craig Blomberg notes, "It is I' reads, more literally, *I am*. This is not bad grammar but a conscious echo of the divine name of Yahweh, as in Exod 3:14. Though still somewhat veiled, this is perhaps Jesus' clearest self-revelation of his divinity to date."⁶ Once again, Jesus himself meets the needs of his disciples; however, he meets their need here not by another miraculous deed, but by his word and self-revelation.

Salvation from the Son of God (Matt. 14:28–33)

Although Matthew, Mark, and John all record Jesus' miracle of walking on water, only Matthew records the story that Peter also walked on the water toward Jesus. In response to Jesus' self-identification, Peter says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water" (v. 28). Commentators have evaluated Peter's request differently. Some, like Calvin, charge Peter with "excessive haste" and urge believers to "learn from the mournful result what it is to overleap the bounds which the Lord has prescribed."⁷ Others, like Lenski, commend Peter's bold faith: "From superstitious terror Peter leaps to the opposite extreme, the daring of faith. It is characteristic of him to act thus quickly."⁸

³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:238.

⁴ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 234.

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 571.

⁶ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 235.

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:241.

⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 573.

Once again, Matthew does not editorialize in a way that helps us to evaluate Peter's request. The only clue we have comes in the simple response of Jesus: "Come" (v. 29). France is probably right to note that, though Jesus tells Peter to come and implies "that had he had sufficient faith it would have succeeded" ("O you of little faith"; v. 31), "the eventual failure of the experiment perhaps suggests that Matthew does not intend it to be taken as a model for others to follow, but rather as a cautionary tale."⁹ We would do well to remember the admonition of Romans 12:3: "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." Peter is willing to do anything for his Master; however, it is wiser to allow the Master to set the terms, rather than proposing bold leaps of faith to him while asking him to bless them.

Nevertheless, Jesus did not abandon Peter in his time of need. When Peter saw the waves and began to sink, "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, 'O you of little faith, why did you doubt?'" (v. 31). Lenski wisely observes the subtle way in which Jesus addresses the faith of Peter through this story of Peter's physical sinking: "Not with both hands did he grasp Peter's body in order to hold him up by main force; only with one hand, only taking hold of him, not lifting his entire weight. The saving for which Peter cried was a physical deliverance out of the engulfing water. The saving Jesus granted him was more, namely this physical deliverance by the spiritual restoration of his faith."¹⁰ Therefore, on this point, "Peter is here paradoxically a model both of faith and of lack of faith."¹¹ Jesus worked from Peter's bold request to increase his disciple's faith.

Beyond Peter, the rest of this section tells us that Jesus was also working on the faith of all his disciples. When Jesus and Peter climbed into the boat, "the wind ceased" (v. 32). After having witnessed Jesus walking on water and calming the wind (in addition to the prior miracle of feeding the five thousand), "those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God'" (v. 33).¹² Carson notes, then, that the "climax of the story is not the stilling of the storm (v.32) but the confession and worship of the disciples: 'Truly you are the Son of God' (v.33). This is the first time Jesus has been addressed by the disciples with this full title (cf. 16:16; 26:63; 27:40, 43, 54). But it already lurks behind 3:17 ('my Son'), and the devil has used it of Jesus (4:3, 6)."¹³ Jesus claims to be Yahweh ("I am"), and his disciples worship him for it.

Salvation from Sickness (Matt. 14:34–36)

The last three verses in Matthew 14 do not deal directly with the narrative of Jesus' walking on water. Instead, the connection is chronological, narrating what happens after Jesus and his disciples "had crossed over" and arrived "to land at Gennesaret" (v. 34). As the crowds had followed Jesus to his desolate place in the previous story (Matt. 14:13), so now the men of that place recognized him and spread the news of his arrival, so that this region also brought their sick to Jesus, pleading to

⁹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 567–68.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 575–76.

¹¹ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 423.

¹² "As in both Mark and John, this miracle occurs immediately after the feeding of the five thousand. The effect of these successive narratives is powerful." (Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 421.)

¹³ Carson, "Matthew," 394.

touch the fringe of his garment to be made well (vv. 35–36). While this is a short, summarizing passage, we may make a few comments.

First, this is the second time that Jesus heals someone when they touch his garment (Matt. 9:21–22). By these stories, Matthew does not suggest that Jesus' garment somehow possesses power in itself. Rather, the point is that *Jesus* healed these people through their faith (see Matt. 9:22).¹⁴ Second, Blomberg notes that Matthew uses a slightly different word for “healed” here than what appears through the rest of the Gospel, suggesting that the word “may carry extra emphasis and mean *completely healed*.”¹⁵ Finally, Calvin zooms out from this passage to capture its thrust as a whole “to show that the glory of Christ was attested not by one or by another miracle, but that this part of Judea was filled with innumerable proofs of it, the report of which might easily be carried to Jerusalem and to other towns in every direction.”¹⁶ Jesus continues to demonstrate his power and authority in every area of his ministry.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Matthew communicate an abrupt transition away from Jesus' miracle of feeding the 5,000 (v. 22)? How forcefully does Jesus even send away his own disciples (v. 22)? What does Jesus do once he is finally alone (v. 23)? As Jesus prays, what are the disciples facing (v. 24)? Why do you think that Jesus sent his disciples away to face a storm without him? How does Jesus come to their rescue? What does he reveal about his identity (v. 27)?
2. What do you make of Peter's request to Jesus in v. 28? Was he overly confident, or confidently faithful? What might we learn to answer that question from Jesus' own response (v. 29)? How successful was Peter? What caused Peter to begin to sink? How does Peter respond when he starts to sink (v. 30)? How does Jesus use this incident to save Peter by building up his faith? How does Jesus help to develop the faith of all his disciples here (v. 33)?
3. After the whirlwind of ministry and interaction with the crowds over the last couple of chapters, why might we expect Jesus to stay away from people when he lands at Gennesaret (v. 34)? What happens with the crowds instead (v. 35)? How does Jesus respond to their requests to be healed (v. 36)? What does this teach us about the faithfulness and constancy of our Lord as he carries out his mission of salvation?
4. Where do you find yourself waiting for the Lord's rescue? Like the disciples on the lake, where do you feel stuck, caught in a storm, rowing endlessly without seeming to make any progress? Where does Jesus feel distant during these storms? What comfort should we take from the fact that Jesus is busy praying for us (Heb. 7:25)? How does his intercession for us relate to his salvation for us? How might he be teaching you his identity as the great “I AM” through this?

¹⁴ “Jesus consented to this procedure and honored this faith—every touch brought perfect restoration to health.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 580.)

¹⁵ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 237.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:243.