

“YOU OF LITTLE FAITH, WHY ARE YOU SO AFRAID?”

Matthew 8:18-34

Key Verse: 8:26

“He replied, ‘You of little faith, why are you so afraid?’ Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.”

This passage contains three events: Jesus teaches the cost of discipleship, Jesus calms the storm, and Jesus drives out evil spirits from two men. At first glance, these events may seem to have merely a chronological relationship. But when we carefully trace Matthew’s thought, we find a deeper connection. It is this: Those who follow Jesus with an unconditional decision can come to know who Jesus really is. Jesus amazes and fills our hearts with peace and victory. Then we become useful for his purpose of world salvation. Today we learn the secret to truly knowing Jesus. Let’s listen carefully to his word.

First, Jesus says, “Follow me” (18-23).

Look at verse 18. “When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake.” This crowd had been stirred by Jesus’ beautiful words from the Sermon on the Mount. They had been healed by Jesus’ compassionate touch. They were hanging around Jesus and they were happy. If any ordinary man were in Jesus’ situation, he would probably enjoy his success and chat with people around him. Jesus did not. Jesus “gave orders” to cross to the other side of the lake. Jesus was eager to spread the gospel even into Gentile territory. Jesus showed an example of pioneering spirit to his disciples. From the beginning of his ministry, disciples followed Jesus who were ready to obey his orders. The core group was the Twelve, whom we will meet in chapter 10. There were many others as well. Jesus did not politely request that they set out on a cruise. Jesus “gave orders.” It required obedience that comes from trust and commitment. In this way, Jesus sifted the crowd to find disciples who would trust and obey him.

Look at verse 19. “Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, ‘Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.’” Most likely, this man had been greatly moved by Jesus’ teachings. He appreciated Jesus’ teachings because they were dynamic, they had life-giving power, and there was the absoluteness of God in them. Moreover, Jesus put into practice what he taught setting a good example. But the teachers of the law, including himself, spoke from their own minds and were relativistic and vague. They failed to live up to their own standard, and were all hypocrites. This man was probably tired of such a life. He wanted to follow Jesus, learn from Jesus, and become a true teacher of the law. His inspiration was good. However, he didn’t really know what he was saying to Jesus. Following Jesus would be quite different from the privileged life he might have led as an honored teacher of the law. Jesus did not teach in a classroom, but in the fields and while walking on the roads. Jesus would not provide food and lodging and pocket money for snacks and movies. Jesus and his disciples would skip meals, and often sleep under the stars, even when it was cold.

Look at verse 20. “Jesus replied, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.’” To explain the humble lifestyle that Jesus would live, Jesus compared it to that of animals—and in favor of the animals. Even the foxes and birds have a home to go to. But Jesus had no home. Jesus had no house, no condominium, no apartment, no garage, no anything. In verse 20, Jesus refers to himself as “the Son of Man.” This title emphasizes Jesus’ humanity and humility. In order to be with us, Jesus, the holy Son of God, renounced his heavenly power and glory and came to this world as a man. While on earth, he became a servant of all kinds of people. For an aristocratic and accomplished teacher of the law, to learn the humble and serving life of Jesus might be harder than sleeping on cold ground. He had to die to his pride and self-glory seeking desire. He had to renounce his confidence in the things of the world. He had to be willing to lose everything in the world that he had trusted in for security. Then he could follow Jesus. Such a decision is costly, but the reward is Jesus himself. To be with Jesus is worth losing all the things of the world. William M. Miller served as a missionary to Iran for over 40 years in the beginning of the 20th century. Converts to Christ were few and far between during his tenure as a missionary. However, there was one of particular note. An Arabic princess heard the gospel and believed in Jesus. As a result she lost her standing as royalty, her comfortable lifestyle, and most of her wealth. She was left with only one sickly servant and a pauper’s house on the edge of a small town. Instead of marrying a prince, she remained single. Yet she was happy. She believed she had gained the greatest treasure because she had Jesus.

Look at verse 21. “Another disciple said to him, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’” This man wanted to cross the lake with Jesus, but he felt torn between because of his human responsibility to his father. We don’t know if his father had actually died, or if he was even sick. Perhaps he simply wanted to care for his father in his old age. In any case, this man makes a great contrast with James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who left their father in the boat to obey Jesus’ call.

How did Jesus deal with his request? Look at verse 22. “But Jesus told him, ‘Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.’” Jesus taught clearly that we must put a first priority in Jesus’ call to discipleship. No excuse can justify a delay. It is true that emotional attachments in families run deep. The word of God tells us, “Honor your father and your mother” (Ex 20:12). Jesus obeyed his parents. Jesus cared for his mother, even from the cross. We must love, respect and care for our parents. However, we must give first place to Jesus’ call to discipleship. Jesus himself showed us the example. When his ministry was growing, once his mother and brothers came and stood outside the house where he was teaching, wanting to see him. Jesus was giving the word of life to dying souls. He did not stop teaching the Bible. Instead, he said, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Mt 12:50). When we do God’s will, we join his eternal family. But those who turn back from following Jesus are dead spiritually. Even if they enjoy a few brief years of human fellowship, they forfeit the best blessing of God and will be full of regret, perhaps forever. When we put Jesus first, we gain eternal life and we can give good influence to our family members.

Look at verse 23. “Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him.” Those in the boat with Jesus were those who had counted the cost of following him. They knew Jesus would not give them a paycheck. They knew that inconvenience and hardship were to be expected. They must have struggled with their human emotions and filial loyalties. But they had decided to follow Jesus unconditionally. What about you?

Second, Jesus said, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” (24-27).

Look at verse 24. “Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping.” The Sea of Galilee is below sea level and surrounded by plateaus which have deep ravines carved into them. When air pressure changes, a sudden wind can come upon the lake turning it from glassy calm to wild and stormy almost instantly. Such a storm suddenly came against their boat. The howling wind whipped the waves into a turbulent frenzy, crashing them against the boat, filling it with water. The danger was real, and the disciples feared for their lives. But Jesus was sleeping. Here we see Jesus’ humanity. Jesus got tired and he slept soundly, so soundly that a furious storm could not wake him. We can also see Jesus’ holiness. Jesus was not afraid or alarmed by anything. There was perfect peace in Jesus, and he could sleep well.

The disciples were helpless before the storm. But they believed Jesus could save them. So they cried out to him. Look at verse 25. “The disciples went and woke him, saying, ‘Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!’” Their response is natural. Any ordinary man or woman could be fearful in that situation. However, to Jesus, they were not right. Look at verse 26a. “He replied, ‘You of little faith, why are you so afraid?’” Jesus did not sympathize with them. Jesus did not apologize for sleeping soundly while they were struggling with the storm. Jesus challenged them to overcome their fear by the power of faith.

Fear has always been a great enemy of mankind. Those who live in fear are bound with invisible chains; they are like puppets of the devil (Heb 2:15). Every time they want to do something right or something great, their chains tighten. Taunted by the devil, they remain paralyzed. On the other hand, those who overcome their fear become the great men and women in history. This past week, Coretta Scott King passed away. During the civil rights movement of the 1960s, she stood side by side with her husband, Dr. Martin Luther King. She confronted hostility and violence rooted in centuries of racial prejudice. She bore persecution, hatred, and the assassination of her husband, making her a young widow. She knew how to overcome fear and live courageously in a dangerous time. The power of her faith and spirit overcame evil with good. As a testimony to her, her body was laid in the Georgia Capitol Rotunda, once the stronghold of segregation in the South. She was the first woman and the first black person to receive this honor.

Jesus’ disciples must overcome fear. It is not an option. It was lesson number one in their discipleship training course. According to recent studies many young people fear most to be socially humiliated. Many cannot raise their hands in the classroom for fear that if they say something strange they will be ridiculed. This fear robs them of a meaningful interaction with their teachers and results in ignorance. Fear of defeat causes many to surrender before

fighting the battle. Fear of the unknown prevents many from venturing beyond their comfort zones. Fear of change leads people to shun new ideas and condemns them to a boring life of habitual mediocrity. Fear of rejection has frozen relationships and locked people in isolation, when a simple apology or act of kindness might open a door to a beautiful relationship. Our coworkers at Northeastern have been praying to establish a UBF Bible club on the campus. There was an opponent in the student council who spoke harshly to them. At first, some were frightened. But one shepherdess overcame her fear and sent flowers to the opponent. All coworkers prayed for God's help. Soon opposition subsided, and last week the application for a UBF Bible club at Northeastern was approved.

Ultimately, fear is rooted in the fear of death. The Bible calls death the last enemy of mankind (1Co 15:26). Jesus conquered this enemy for us through his death and resurrection. Jesus said in John 11:25-26, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Jesus taught us that death is like a sweet sleep (Jn 11:11). It is entry into glory in his kingdom. Jesus showed us there is nothing to fear by his own courageous death on the cross (Jn 19:30).

We can know this in theory, but still be bound to inner fear in our practical lives. This is why Jesus brought his disciples into the storm at sea. It is only through struggling to follow Jesus in the real world that we truly know ourselves and how much we need Jesus. So Jesus uses storms of life to train us. They come upon us, not as punishment, but as divine love, when we are doing our best to follow Jesus. We should not be surprised. We should not envy those who remained on the shore. Storms are the opportunity to grow in faith. Jesus wants to make us great men and women of God through storm training. Are you in a storm? Let's listen to Jesus' word, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Let's overcome the storms of life by faith.

After helping his disciples, Jesus dealt with the storm. Look at verse 26b. "Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm." Jesus has power to subdue the winds and the waves. Jesus is God Almighty. Jesus can calm any kind of storm with one word from his mouth. Look at verse 27. "The men were amazed and asked, 'What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!'" The disciples were no longer fearful at all. They were overwhelmed with amazement at Jesus.

Third, Jesus said, "Go" (28-34).

Jesus and his disciples arrived at the other side of the lake in the region of the Gadarenes. This was Gentile territory. Jesus went there to meet two men whom everyone else avoided. From Israel, Jesus heard their desperate cry. So he went to visit them. Jesus also wanted to further train his disciples in practical faith, godly compassion, and even missionary vision. Look at verse 28. Two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met Jesus. The phrase, "demon-possessed" clearly says that these men were the possession of demons. This is not what God intended. God made each human being with a unique personality, as we see in the uniqueness of fingerprints and retinal patterns. This unique identity is God's special gift of love to each person. We can enjoy this uniqueness when we find ourselves in God and live in obedience to his word. But if one rebels against God, God may give him over to his sinful nature, and ultimately to demons, who work hard in the disobedient (Ro 1:28; Eph 2:2). A person who is possessed by a demon is no longer in charge of his life. Instead, the demons are in charge. Demons drove these men to dwell among the dead in tombs. Demons made these men so violent that they damaged many others. Demons were stomping and shouting through these men to torment the entire region with the power of darkness. Men are helpless before the power of demons.

However, demons are scared to death of Jesus. Look at verses 29-31. "What do you want with us, Son of God?" they shouted. 'Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?' Some distance from them a large herd of pigs was feeding. The demons begged Jesus, 'If you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs.'" The demons were afraid of Jesus because they knew that Jesus is the Son of God. They knew that Jesus could do with them whatever he wanted to do. They knew that the day would come when Jesus would throw them into the fiery lake of burning sulfur for eternal condemnation (Jude 6). They trembled before Jesus, knowing he would drive them out of the men. So they groveled before Jesus, begging to be sent into the pigs.

Jesus has no pity on demons. Jesus allows the work of demons to educate mankind about the foolishness of life without God. But Jesus came to destroy the work of demons (1Jn 3:8). Demons are agents of Satan and they work to establish Satan's reign. Jesus is the Son of God who destroys demons to restore God's righteous rule in men and in the world. These men had suffered much under the torment of demons. Now Jesus wanted to set them free by an act

of his grace. Mark's gospel goes into much more detail and emphasizes Jesus' compassion for a demon-possessed man. But Matthew simply emphasizes Jesus' authority to drive out demons. Until this moment, Jesus had not said a word. He simply commanded the fear and respect of the demons by his very presence. The mere sight of Jesus made them confess everything they knew and beg for more time before their inevitable condemnation. Jesus, the King of kings, ruled the atmosphere completely. Then Jesus spoke just a word. Look at verse 32. "He said to them, 'Go!' So they came out and went into the pigs, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water."

Here we learn Jesus' authority over demons. With just one word, Jesus drove them out of the men. When Jesus said, "Go!" they were compelled to leave immediately, whether they liked it or not. They had to obey Jesus. This same Jesus drives out demons with a word in our time as well. The power of Jesus was manifest through what happened next. No one can control pigs. They are too dirty and stubborn. But when the demons came into them, they moved as one body and committed mass suicide. The power of demons was pretty strong. Yet Jesus drove out this terrible force with a word. Of course, Jesus knew that the pigs would be lost. But Jesus did not mind sacrificing a herd of pigs to save two men from the torment of demons.

Look at verses 33-34. "Those tending the pigs ran off, went into the town and reported all this, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men. Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region." Jesus had brought a great spiritual blessing to the people of that region by driving out the demons that had tormented them. But in their spiritual ignorance, the townspeople misunderstood, thinking that Jesus caused the ruin of their pig business. So they began to fear for their chicken business, and their beef business and asked Jesus to leave them alone. They were not much different than the demon-possessed men. They needed Jesus. This was a preview of the gospel's spread to the Gentile world, which was soon to come through the disciples.

To follow Jesus, we must make an unconditional decision to put him first in our lives. We must follow Jesus when he calls and go where he wants. Then we can experience his power and live victorious lives. Let's overcome fear by faith and follow Jesus.