

TAKE COURAGE! IT IS I. DON'T BE AFRAID

Matthew 14:22-36

Key Verse: 14:27

“But Jesus immediately said to them: ‘Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.’”

In this passage Jesus teaches his disciples courageous faith in the midst of a storm. We might wish that our lives were pleasant all the time and that we were like a ship sailing in smooth waters. But the reality of life is that there are many hardships and sufferings and problems. We can call them the storms of life. Everyone confronts storms of life sooner or later. However, how we handle the storms of life makes a great difference. Jesus uses the storms of life to teach us who he really is. Jesus is God. When we have faith in Jesus that, we can find the meaning of the storms of life. When we have faith in Jesus we can be victorious over the storms of life and render glory to God.

First, Jesus prays and the disciples struggle (22-24).

Look at verses 22-23. “Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone....” After the feeding of the five thousand with five loaves and two fish something happened in the hearts of the crowd of people. According to John’s gospel they became so enamored with the idea of getting free bread for life that they wanted to make Jesus king by force. They did not understand the work of the Messiah or who the Messiah really was. Their effort to form a political movement could give bad influence to Jesus’ disciples at a time when he had to teach them the spiritual meaning of his coming into the world. So Jesus made them get into a boat and go on ahead of him to the other side of the lake while Jesus himself dismissed the crowd. Probably the disciples did not want to leave Jesus. They wanted to stay with Jesus. But Jesus made them get into the boat. Jesus was like a mother who puts her children through hardship for their own good even though they don’t want to experience it. There was a lady on the south side of Chicago who lived in a bad neighborhood. Every day her son had to meet bullies who took his lunch money. On finding out about this, she stopped giving him lunch money and she stopped cooking for him. She told him, “If you want to eat, you must fight.” For a couple of days he went hungry. On the third day, he came home with a black eye telling his mother he fought that day. Then she cooked him a big dinner with his favorite food. From that time on, the bullies left him alone. In the same way Jesus sends his disciples away from the miraculous experiences with him to confront the reality of the world as it is. Some things cannot be learned by reading a book or hearing a story, but must be experienced in the real world.

So the disciples got into the boat and set off. Jesus stayed behind and dismissed the crowd. Most likely Jesus encouraged them to study the Bible continuously, work hard at their jobs, love each other, and worship God from their hearts. Then Jesus went up on the mountain to pray. Jesus was by himself and alone with God. It was what Jesus had sought when he crossed the lake in the first place. Jesus must have brought his anguish over the death of John the Baptist to God. Jesus must have prayed for the strength and grace to take up his cross of mission as the Lamb of God. Jesus must have prayed for his disciples and for all people who needed a shepherd. Jesus was strengthened through prayer. Jesus power source was prayer. Jesus source of wisdom was prayer. Jesus depended on God in prayer.

What were the disciples doing? Look at verses 24. “...but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.” The disciples were struggling against the wind. Some of them were experienced in sailing. But the strong winds would not allow them to make progress. They made it out into the middle of the lake and there they seemed to just get stuck and could not make progress. The Sea of Galilee was only six miles across. They should have been able to cross rather quickly. However, the wind was against them. They could not make much progress. They only struggled without getting anywhere. We can give them credit for not turning around and coming back. Jesus had told them to cross over to the other side and they were determined to obey his direction even though it was very hard. Still, we must admit that they were stuck. Many of us get stuck in this way. Perhaps it is in a relationship problem. Though we try hard, we just don’t make any progress in a relationship. Or it may be with a financial problem. Though we work hard day after day, we don’t seem to get anywhere. Or it may be with school study or with our own personal growth either in our profession or spiritually. Or it may be a health problem. Though we try hard to eat right and exercise we just don’t make any progress in controlling our bodies. We know we are in the right place because we followed Jesus’ orders. But we are stuck. Usually there is a reason for this. We may be too confident in our own ability. Or we may have underestimated the

problem we are up against. In either case, the only way to get out of the problem is with divine help. We can take great comfort in knowing that Jesus comes to us in such times.

Second, Jesus goes out to meet his disciples (25-27).

Look at verses 25-27. "During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. 'It's a ghost,' they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them: 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.'" The fourth watch of the night begins at 3:00 a.m. The disciples were tired. They began to be grumpy. At that time, Jesus went out to them walking on the lake. The problem that was so difficult to the disciples was no problem to Jesus. Jesus just went out to the disciples walking on the lake. Jesus is God who rules nature. Jesus can calm the storm and Jesus can walk on water. Jesus can pass through the most difficult problem without any difficulty whatsoever. Jesus can surf on the problem or Jesus can make the problem go away. Jesus is bigger and greater and stronger than any problem or difficulty we can confront. Moreover, Jesus is willing to come to us in the midst of the struggle. When we are in the boat following Jesus' orders Jesus will be responsible for us.

However, when Jesus came to the disciples they did not recognize him. They thought Jesus was a ghost. How could they see think Jesus was a ghost? Did Jesus look scary? No. Look at verse 25 again. They had fear in their hearts. Fear has a powerful effect on people. This kind of inner fear distorts reality and makes people see God's help as something to be afraid of. Sometimes people become very frightened to see their Bible teacher or to see their pastor. Even though their spiritual friend only wants to help them, when fear is in their hearts they can easily misunderstand.

The disciples cried out in fear. We don't know exactly what they said, but they cried out in fear. They confessed their weakness and need. They may not necessarily have cried out to Jesus for help. But they realized that they could not help themselves. Sometimes we need exactly the kind of training that Jesus gave his disciples to realize our need for Jesus. Some young people are very confident about themselves. Perhaps because of their abilities, intelligence or training they are better than others at problem solving or in winning some kind of competition. But there are many kinds of problems that we cannot solve. Sometimes Jesus lets us struggle with these problems for a while until we cannot but cry out in fear and helplessness.

When the disciples cried out, Jesus immediately said to them, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." When Jesus said "Take courage," he was imparting divine courage into their hearts. This was not the disciples summoning up some kind of hidden resources in themselves. It was Jesus' divine help to them through his word of encouragement. Jesus' word of encouragement drives out fear from our hearts and replaces it with divine courage. When Jesus encourages his people, they turn from shivering cowards into people of tremendous energy and strength to confront the hardships of life.

The basis for the disciples' courage was Jesus himself. The words, "It is I," have a similar meaning in the Greek to the words of God to Moses when he met him at the burning bush. God called himself, "I am." God is the Almighty Creator God who made the heavens and the earth by the words of his mouth. God is the Almighty Creator God who parted the Red Sea and let the people of Israel pass through as on dry land. God is the Almighty Creator God who made the walls of Jericho fall down flat before his people. When this God is with us we have nothing to fear. When this God is with us we are more than conquerors in every situation of life.

Once St. Paul was in a storm at sea as he was being brought to Rome as a prisoner. The storm was severe. The crew threw everything overboard except the food and put out the sea anchors. Still, the ship was driven helplessly before the wind farther and farther out to sea. All on board had given up hope. Then the Lord visited Paul. The Lord planted courage in his heart and gave him a promise that he must stand trial before Caesar. With that promise in his heart, Paul gained great courage and he could encourage all the men on the ship and give them wise counsel that led to the salvation of them all. One man of God who has one word of Jesus' promise in his heart can stand the storm of life with courage and be a great blessing to others.

When Dr. Samuel Lee began to disciple American students with the word of God, he was badly misunderstood by some parents. In some cases, the parents were upset because their children had never listened to them, but they seemed to obey Dr. Lee absolutely. Of course, it was not Dr. Lee, but Jesus working through him whom they

obeyed. But some parents could not discern this and they became furious toward Dr. Lee. They began to hire “deprogrammers” to kidnap their children and intimidate them until they renounced their commitment to disciple training in UBF. At that time, there was a severe storm in Chicago UBF and throughout the USA. We never knew when kidnappers would strike and take away God’s precious sheep by force. But Dr. Lee held God’s promise in his heart that God had called him to America to raise up a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. So he was fearless in the face of great danger. He also inspired all of us to challenge the dangerous situation by having faith in Jesus and working hard to carry out one-to-one Bible study. When we have Jesus and his word of promise in our hearts we can overcome the world and render glory to God.

Third, Peter and all the disciples grow in faith (28-33).

Look at verses 28-29. “‘Lord, if it’s you,’ Peter replied, ‘tell me to come to you on the water.’ ‘Come,’ he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus.” Peter was so happy to see Jesus. He had been longing for Jesus and now Jesus had come to him. After getting over his inner fear, Peter was ready to do anything to be reunited with Jesus. He did not just sit down in the boat waiting for Jesus to come in, but he asked Jesus to let him come to him. Some may think Jesus’ attitude was presumptuous. But Jesus invited him, saying, “Come.” Jesus welcomes our efforts to be closer to him even if we may seem odd in others’ eyes. Peter did not care what anyone thought. He only wanted to be near to Jesus. When Jesus bid him come, Peter got out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. Peter did the same thing Jesus was doing when he fixed his eyes on Jesus. We too can do great things when we fix our eyes on Jesus. Here, fixing our eyes on Jesus means to be in prayer and Bible study with our thoughts focused on Jesus constantly.

Look at verses 30-31. “But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. ‘You of little faith,’ he said, ‘why did you doubt?’” For a moment Peter took his eyes off of Jesus and began to look at the wind. The wind was so fierce. When Peter looked at the wind instead of looking at Jesus he fell into fear and began to sink. Here looking at the wind is looking at the situation. It may be looking at another person with whom we are struggling. It may be looking at a problem we cannot solve. It may be spending too much time watching Hollywood movies. But whatever the reason, when we take our eyes off of Jesus and look at the situation, we fall into fear. When we fall into fear, we cannot overcome the storm at all and begin to sink. At that moment, we must do what Peter did and cry out to Jesus to save us. Jesus’ response was immediate. Jesus reached out and caught Peter and pulled him up out of the water. Then Jesus rebuked him for doubting instead of believing. Jesus really wants us to learn faith to walk on water during the storms.

When Dr. Samuel Lee was preparing International Summer Bible Conference at MSU in 1995, there was a severe spell of hot weather in Chicago. The temperature reached 106 on several occasions and did not let up for more than two weeks. Around 300 people in the city died of heat related causes. It seemed too difficult to carry out the conference. Dr. Lee did not want to invite foreign missionaries to America to die of heat exposure. So he challenged us to pray for good weather. No one could believe that God would change the weather. But because Dr. Lee challenged us we prayed for it. Then that night a miracle happened. The weather system changed and we suddenly had cool and nice weather for the conference. Dr. Lee knew how to walk on water during the storm of life.

When the tsunami struck Indonesia in 2004, it brought devastation on a large scale. It seemed to strike without discrimination. The day afterward I was watching the CNN coverage and they were interviewing people live to get their response to the disaster. They happened to interview an Indonesian Christian pastor without knowing what he would say. He began to talk about his experience of a miracle. When he saw the disaster coming, he stood his ground and began to cry out to Jesus for help. He stood between the tsunami and his congregation and cried out for protection in the name of Jesus. Then remarkably, the tsunami waters did not touch the area he had prayed for. His church members were all safe and even the property was not damaged. He had walked on water in the midst of a storm.

Jesus is eager to see our faith grow through the storms of life. Jesus even welcomes our request to come closer to him by making his power available to him. Let’s fix our eyes on Jesus and experience his victory.

Look at verses 32-33. “And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’” The disciples forgot about the wind and the waves. They

only saw Jesus the Son of God who had power over nature. They worshiped him as God. They came to know Jesus as he truly is.

Fourth, Jesus heals the sick by his power (34-36).

Though Jesus is the Son of God with all power and authority over nature and all things, he uses his power to express his love. When he and his disciples landed at Gennesaret, the people heard about it. They began to bring all kinds of sick people to Jesus. They brought many sick people from all the surrounding countryside. There must have been men with leprosy, the demon possessed and many kinds of disabled people. Jesus touched them one by one with his mighty hand. Then they were healed at once. Thanks be to Jesus who uses his power to heal. There have been many men throughout history who wanted power and some who obtained great power. But they always wanted to use their power to do evil things. They used their power to oppress others and carry out their own evil desires. So Abraham Lincoln said, "If you want to know a man's character, give him power." Lord Acton said, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." So many have failed after obtaining great power. But Jesus is not like fallen men. Jesus is the Son of God. Not only does he have great power, but he has the character of God. He is good. He is loving and kind. He uses his power to heal and to save.

In this passage we learned that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus has power to walk on water. Jesus is pleased to help us grow in faith to experience his power. When we do so, we can be victors of life. Let's fix our eyes on Jesus and live victorious lives every day.