

## John 34 – The Fifth Sign: Strolling Along The Waters

10/20/2024

### Scripture 1: (Jn. 6:16-21 ESV)

When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened.

But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.

### Sermon:

Immediately after performing the fourth Sign of His divinity: the miraculous feeding of five thousand men along with an uncounted number of attending women and children; and demonstrating that Jesus is the LORD, the Provider for Israel, He retreated further up the mountain to be alone and escape a crowd that wanted to declare Him king. Matthew and Mark explain that Jesus was seeking solitude to pray (Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:46); to be alone with God the Father. Now, since it is universally accepted that John was the last Gospel written, and that it was written as encouragement for established Christian believers, it is reasonable for us to presume that his audience were also familiar with the other Gospels, just as we are; therefore, in the places where they overlap, it is acceptable to rely on and use the Synoptics to better illuminate John's narratives {using the "analogy of Scripture", a primary method of Biblical interpretation where more clear passages of Scripture are used to explain or better understand less clear passages; using Scripture to interpret Scripture}. So together, the evangelists remind us, that Jesus needed His prayer time too. and since He was intentional about devoting time to pray, then that is something we need to do as well. Remember, Jesus most often taught by example (5:19-20).

So, after this miraculous feeding, "*When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.*". It was late in the day. It was already getting dark and night was falling, when the Twelve set sail for Capernaum to return "home": to return to Jesus' base of operations and where many of their families were. But, why did they go and leave Jesus behind? John does not tell us, but both Matthew and Mark explain that Jesus made them leave Him behind (Matthew 14:22; Mark 6:45), implying that He would "catch up" later.

As strange as it might sound to us, this is not a surprising thing, since Jesus often seemed to send the disciples off ahead of Him. Nor were they abandoning Him in a dangerous wilderness, because Bethsaida was only about 7.5 km or 4.5 miles away from Capernaum walking. It would not have been a terrible hike, only taking perhaps two or three hours. Lastly, spending the night out of doors, in between places, while traveling was a common practice in their time and place.

Regardless, even if Jesus did not give them a specific command to leave Him, since it was late and Jesus had not yet joined them for the voyage home, they would have assumed that He had been invited to stay with someone nearby; that a stranger from the crowd invited Him to spend the night and that Jesus would head home the next day, which was a common enough occurrence in the other Gospels. This would not have been an unreasonable assumption since practicing hospitality was considered to be a great virtue and a blessing for the host.

So, the disciples set sail in the late evening for what should have been a quick and easy trip. Although Capernaum was not that far away by land, sailing would still ordinarily be faster and easier than walking. However, the weather on the Sea of Galilee is fickle and unpredictable even during the best of seasons<sup>1</sup>. Remember, due to it being located at a very low elevation and being surrounded by high mountains creating a bowl shape, fierce storms form over the Sea with little to no warning (especially without warning at night, because of the darkness). Therefore, since they were out on the water in the dark of night, it is not unreasonable that the disciples were caught by surprise as, *“The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing.”*

Now sailing with wind power is what would make the journey to Capernaum easier and faster, but when the wind becomes too strong and the waves become too tall {because the Sea of Galilee is also relatively shallow (ave. 150 feet or 50 yards deep) and shallower waters make bigger waves}, a small water craft risks being capsized<sup>2</sup> unless the sail is furled and they rely upon oars for propulsion and stability instead. The weather became too rough to use the sail. They were forced to row by hand and suddenly, what was expected to be an easy sail became a struggle just to achieve any forward progress.

Now both Matthew and Mark tell us that what happens next, happened during the “fourth watch” of the night (which was some when between 3am and 6am) (Matthew 14:25; Mark 6:48), *“When they had rowed about three or four miles...”*. They further explain that the disciples were struggling and making slow progress because the wind was against them. Not only were they experiencing rough seas, but they were also facing a strong headwind which they had to fight to overcome. They spent nearly the entire night rowing and steering their ship, fighting against the weather. It took all night for them to only travel three or four miles across the stormy sea, but now they were finally nearing their destination. That was when their difficult night turned strange.

*“...they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened.”*. They saw **Jesus** walking on the sea; He was just strolling along atop the waves, as if they were gently rolling hills, and He was coming right towards them. To their minds:

- What they saw was impossible.
- What they saw was incomprehensible.
- What they saw was inconceivable!
- What they saw went beyond the scope of their wildest imaginings! The concept of a person walking on water, like that, was not even found in pagan myths.

Matthew and Mark tell us that the disciples thought that they were seeing a “ghost”, but what did that mean to them? “Ghost” is used to translate the Greek word *phantasm*, which may also be understood as “apparition”. However, they would not have thought that it was a dead person's spirit; such types of ghosts, ghouls, and goblins were not a part of their cultural imaginings. They saw something, but they did not know what it was. Perhaps they thought that it was an atmospheric effect like “St. Elmo's Fire<sup>3</sup>” at first, but then they realized that they were not seeing “some thing”, but that instead they were seeing “some one”; like a visible spirit of some kind; perhaps an angel or demon, but they could not rightly know.

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1 For more details about the topography's effect upon the weather, please refer back to my sermon on 12/11/2022 entitled, “Jesus is the Mighty God”

2 <https://www.seetheholyland.net/jesus-boat/>

3 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St.\\_Elmo%27s\\_fire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Elmo%27s_fire)

So, responding naturally, as to any supernatural appearance, they became frightened. Moreso, they were terrified. Yet, the English translators lose some of the forceful effect of the Greek when they describe the disciples response. Grammatically, the verb being used {(*phobeo*; indicative, aorist, passive, 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural)} may be better expressed as {they were caused to become frightened} because their fearful response did not originate internally; they were **made** to be afraid. Something outside of themselves and beyond their understanding affected their reason and influenced their reaction. They became afraid because they had reason to be afraid. They had a very good reason to be fearful because they were being confronted by the most terrifying force in the known universe: holiness. Therefore, surely they were panicked.

They were afeared because these sinful men were being approached by Jesus, whose perfectly divine holiness was on full display. They were feeling as Isaiah did when he found himself in the heavenly throne room, where he fell to his knees crying out, "*Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.*" (Isa. 6:5 KJG). They felt this way because the unholy cannot withstand the presence of holiness; it fears it and wants to flee from it because holiness overcomes, eradicates, and annihilates all unholiness just as light destroys the darkness.

But then, Jesus said to them, "*It is I; do not be afraid.*". Jesus did not just walk up to their boat and say, "Hey guys, what's up?". He did not tell them to "chill out" or to "calm down". Instead, He said, "*It is I; do not be afraid.*". He said, "*Ego eimi*" or even better, "I AM".

Besides being known as the "Signs" Gospel, the Gospel of John is also known for eight specific "I AM" statements made by Jesus; statements where He directly declares Himself to be the LORD, the great "I AM". Although this moment is not ordinarily counted as part of that list, Jesus' use here in the midst of the fifth Sign manifesting His glory as the LORD, leaves room for this to also be interpreted as Jesus claiming the Divine Name, especially since He follows it with the imperative command, "*Do Not Be Afraid!*". He commanded them:

- I AM the LORD, Fear Not! Or,
- In the Name of the LORD, Be Not Afraid!

Jesus's command of "*do not be afraid.*" carried the force of the divine imperative, spoken with sovereign authority and power. Only then, after this, "*Then they were glad to take him into the boat...*". Only after Jesus had commanded their fear away, were they "*...glad to take him into the boat...*"; because now, their fear was gone and because the display of His glory was no longer visible to their perception. Their emotional shift moved them from petrifying terror to joy, relief, and gladness as they welcomed Him aboard their craft.

Then, after Jesus was aboard, "*...immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.*". This actually may be the least miraculous part of the story. John told us how far they had rowed overnight, so we know that they were "almost there" already by the time Jesus appeared to them. Also, Matthew tells us that when Jesus {and Peter} got into the boat, "*...the wind ceased.*" (Matt. 14:32 ESV); so, since the strong force opposing them had ended, they must have arrived at their destination in short order, hence the "*immediately*".

Now this Sign clearly manifested Jesus' glory as the LORD, and it demonstrated this fact in an undeniable way; a way that is impossible to explain away as being either human trickery or through some "natural" excuse as the atheists, unbelievers, and "Liberal Christians": those who claim that Jesus was merely a good man and good teacher but not God in the flesh; like to try. The deniers might allege that:

- The water could have been swapped with wine "off-scene" by the disciples, at Cana.

- The royal official's son probably got better naturally, it was just a “coincidence” that it was at about the same time as his father was talking Jesus.
- The paralytic might not have been “as bad” as John suggested, or perhaps he was a “faker” or “con artist” whom Jesus caught and publicly exposed.
- The feeding of the five thousand “plus” was either a “miracle of sharing” or an elaborate deception by Jesus and the disciples.
- But, there is no reasonable “alternative interpretation” to explain Jesus taking a four mile stroll, straight across the Sea of Galilee in the dark of night, unless one simply chooses to deny the event entirely; perhaps alleging that Jesus had simply snuck away from the crowds and hid Himself in the boat.
  - But to deny the miracles of Christ, to deny any of the divine miracles recorded in Scripture: whether one or all of them; is to deny Jesus, Himself.
    - Either, Jesus did it or He did not.
  - A person cannot justly or rightly claim to be a Christian, to be a follower of Jesus, while denying His works. Period.
    - Either Jesus is God, or He is not but, if He is not God, then He is unimportant and utterly irrelevant in relation to our present day, modern lives.

Now this Sign is very different from all the others in one particular and glaringly significant way: all of the other Signs were “public events” and many of the witnesses to them were not supporters of Jesus and His ministry, yet this event was private and exclusive to the disciples alone. That is evidence enough to permit those who do not want to believe in Jesus, to dismiss it outright as being fantasy and fiction. But, for those of us who do believe in and trust Jesus Christ, we must trust the word of the Apostles, within the boundary of the Holy Spirit's inspiration and His preservation and promulgation of Truth. But, before you assume that we trust them blindly, please remember that everyone who first heard their testimony, and who saw their witness in death, also shared in the same indwelling presence of the the Holy Spirit which confirmed for them that the testimony was true as we do (John 14:26; 1 Corinthians 2:16; 1 Peter 1:12). They were convinced of this story's truth and they believed it. People died for their belief that these things are all true and no person will willingly die for something they know, believe, or even suspect might be a lie because that goes against the human nature of self preservation.

But, once we pause to consider why this Sign was private rather than public, the privacy makes more sense and becomes more reasonable. Consider the immediate reaction of the disciples to Jesus's appearing:

- They were frightened.
- They were terrified.
- They were caused to be afraid because they instinctively knew what and who they were and they knew What and Who was coming towards them: the Holy LORD, God Almighty!

These were just twelve guys on a boat at sea, late at night, in the midst of a storm and fear was their reaction. They were trapped and cornered with no where to go and no way to flee, when their “flight instinct” took over. Now imagine if this had been a large crowd of people, in a city or other populated area, during the day; what would have been the reaction?

- There would have been mass panic and rioting.
- People would have been fighting to escape from His presence.
- It would have been too overwhelming and overpowering, unimaginable and incomprehensible for the general public to experience. Their reaction would have been like the Israelite's reaction at Mount Sinai when they saw the LORD's glory on full display, *“Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.””* (Exod. 20:18-19 ESV)

So really, keeping this divine manifestation private was a kindness from Jesus towards the people.

What does this divine manifestation reveal to us about Jesus as the LORD, God the Son?

It reveals three important things about Him:

- First, although Jesus has already been compared to Moses: declaring Himself (4:26) and being declared (6:14) “the Prophet” who is to come (Deuteronomy 18:16); this miracle demonstrated how much greater Jesus is than Moses.
  - This miracle was impossible for the disciples to doubt or question. They could not deny this miracle because they knew that they had left Jesus back on dry land and they were now miles away across the sea when He appeared walking across the waves. Furthermore, the boat they were using was too small for Him to have “stowed away” with twelve other people on board.
  - This miracle demonstrated Who Jesus is clear enough that Matthew concludes by telling us that they responded by worshiping Him (14:33). This unquestionably proved to them that Jesus is the LORD God.
  - Also, this miracle is unique in Scripture and whenever we find something unique in Scripture, we must always be careful with our interpretation of it, and we must take care to not over emphasize its importance. However, although this miracle is unique, its uniqueness demonstrates Jesus' superiority to three or four men from the Old Testament because it was similar to a miracle that they performed.
    - Moses parted the Red Sea (Exodus 14);
    - The Jordan River parted for Joshua and the Israelites when they first crossed into Canaan (Joshua 3); and,
    - The Jordan River parted for Elijah and Elisha as they crossed back and forth across it, when Elijah was taken up to heaven.
    - God parted the waters for these men (these prophets). He performed a wondrous miracle for them, enabling them to walk through the water as on dry land. But Jesus did not part the waters in order to cross the Sea of Galilee, instead He walked across the waves, as if they were dry land; a far greater and more wondrous miracle than just parting them.
- Just as the Spirit of God hovered over the waters during Creation (Genesis 1:2), so too did Jesus, God the Son, walk upon the waters during the days of His Incarnation.

- Secondly, not only did Jesus manifest His glory in this miracle through His appearance and presence as He approached the disciples in the boat, but it also demonstrated His sovereignty over the elements.
  - His sovereign power is so great, that it is not limited to regulating or commanding the elements. Instead, His casual stroll across the Sea demonstrated His lack of fearful concern about them, His confidence in His position, and the surety that they will conform themselves to His divine will naturally. This showed that even the water and the wind are His submissive and obedient subjects.
- Third and lastly, this miracle reminds us of what every Christian should consider to be one of the greatest miracles that God ever does: Jesus came to the disciples, they did not go to Him {although, according to Matthew, Peter asked Jesus to call him out to Him and when Peter went, he took a few steps before he began to sink}.
  - After the miracle of creation, after the miracle of God's mercy and restraint in not destroying Adam and Eve for their sin, and after the atoning work of Jesus that purchased our redemption, the next greatest, personal miracle of God is the simple fact that the LORD willingly chooses to come to us: His poor creations, who are corrupted by our terrible sinfulness.
    - David wrote, *“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.”* (Ps. 8:3-8 ESV), teaching us that *“The distance between God and his creation is so great, that, although reasoning creatures owe him obedience as their creator, they nonetheless could never realize any blessedness or reward from him without his willingly condescending to them.”* (WCF 7.1) Therefore, God must approach close to us, before we might even dare to come into His presence.

Jesus came to the disciples, presenting Himself and manifesting His glory, just as the LORD came to the Israelites at Mount Sinai (Exodus 20) and just as the LORD came to Abraham while he was still called Abram, back in Ur of the Chaldeans (Genesis 11:31). We cannot come to Jesus, we cannot approach God, unless He draws us to Himself, first (John 6:37, 10:3; Romans 9:10-13, 10:13-15).

The greatest thing about this Sign is that God chooses to come to His people. He chooses to give us peace, and He chooses to deliver us from our struggles and the burden of our sin.

Finally, knowing and believing all of this about Jesus, what does it mean for us?

All of these evidences that are recorded in Scripture by the Gospel writers; all of the evangelism, apologetics, and conversions because of their preaching, and all of the living and dying testimonies of the Apostles and the first generation of disciples should continue to encourage us in our own faith and confidence in Jesus:

- as the only Savior;
- as the trustworthy Prophet;
- as the covenant mediator who is greater than Moses and the mediator of a covenant greater than the one given at Mount Sinai (Hebrews 8);
- as the Son of God, as God the Son, as the LORD, as the Great I AM!

The knowledge that Jesus is sovereign over, and has authority and power over the natural elements reminds us, encourages us, and builds up our confidence:

- that nothing is too great for our God;
- that nothing is impossible for our God; and,
- that God is greater and far more than anything we can imagine!

The sure and certain knowledge that God condescends and chooses to come to us: to personally invite us and welcome His adopted children into His presence; tells us and shows us that He truly does love us. That, although our nature recoils in terror at the first sign of His approach, we are comforted and calmed at His command, to “Fear Not” at the declaration that He Is; that He is the LORD, God Almighty. Once we realize how vast the gulf between sinful humanity and the only Holy God is; knowing that we have no hope within ourselves to cross over it unaided; awakens our hearts to better understand and better appreciate what the LORD, what Jesus, has done for us and how great was His sacrifice for our sake.

Thus we respond to His love, His authority, and His majestic power with thanksgiving and praise.

- We respond to God's love by loving Him, and by loving those made in His Image.
- We respond to God's authority by obeying His commandments and by repenting and begging forgiveness whenever we still transgress them.
- We respond to God's power by giving Him all of the glory and honor that He is due!

### **Doxology**

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;  
 Praise Him, all creatures here below;  
 Praise Him above, ye heav'nly host;  
 Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.  
 Amen.

**AMEN**

## Appendix

Appearances of *ego eimi* within the Gospel of John, as spoken by Jesus and which imply His divinity as YHVH.

- 4:26
- 6:20, 35, 41, 48, 51
- 8:12, 18, 24, 28, 58
- 9:9
- 10:7, 9, 11, 14
- 11:25
- 12:26
- 13:19
- 14:3, 6
- 15:1, 5, 24
- 18:5, 6, 8