

Sinking Faith

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[0 : 00] Well friends, would you turn with me please to the words that we read in Matthew chapter 14. In Matthew chapter 14, and reading again verse 30. Worryed, but when Peter saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink, he cried out, Lord, save me.

And Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, O you of little faith. Why did you doubt? Some of you may know this, but probably not many of you, but I love the music of the Irish rock group U2. In fact, I love their music so much that I did a talk at the Presbytery, I think it was last year, on the spiritual influences in the music of U2.

It was a talk that I thought would finally get me thrown off Presbytery, or at least get me removed from being part of the Presbytery. But I think they're quite desperate these days, and so they kindly decided to keep me on. But one of their songs goes in the following way.

Every shipwrecked soul knows what it is to live without intimacy. Every shipwrecked soul knows what it is to live without intimacy.

Today we're looking at this man, Peter, as we find him in Matthew chapter 14, and what we might call Peter's sinking faith. Peter's sinking faith. And we're looking at this under three headings.

[1 : 40] We're going to look at a stormy night, then a sovereign visitor, and finally a sinking disciple. First we have a stormy night, verses 22 to 24, where Matthew focuses on the storm that the disciples experienced. Matthew begins by giving us this setting in verses 22 and 23.

Jesus has just fed the 5,000. He had seen this great crowd, and he had had compassion on them, and had healed their sick. But he had gone on to feed them using only five loaves and two fish. The crowd had all eaten and were satisfied. Jesus now dismisses the disciples and the crowd in verse 22. He remains in full control of the situation, and he makes, he compels, he forces the disciples to get into their boat and instructs them to go to the other side of the lake.

At the same time, he dismisses the crowd, whom John tells us were trying to make him king. And with the disciples and the crowd out the way, Jesus goes up a mountain to pray.

Verse 23. Matthew emphasizes here the solitude of Jesus. He tells us that Jesus went up on the mountain by himself, and he tells us that when evening came, Jesus was alone. Jesus chooses this time to be alone with his father in prayer. He knows that a major mission to the Gentiles, the non-Jews, is about to begin. He also knows that out of his suffering, that out of his arrest, that out of his death on the cross is drawing nearer. And before these significant events take place, he chooses this time to be alone with his father in prayer.

[3 : 26] Matthew goes on to record the storm in verse 24. He draws their attention to the boat that the disciples were in. We're told that it was a long way from land. The disciples are well on in their journey, but there is still a long way to go. There is a great distance between them and the place that they had set out from, but there is also a great distance between them and the place that they had set out for. And the disciples find themselves in the middle of a storm. The boat is being beaten, tortured and distressed by the waves. At the same time, the wind is against them. The disciples are in a situation that is difficult, a situation that is dangerous, a situation that is deadly. Friends, as we focus on these verses, we're being reminded that if we are following Jesus, we might well end up in a storm. If we are following Jesus, we might well end up in a storm. That is what happened to these disciples. Jesus had told them to get into their boat, told them to make for the other side, and they had quietly done so.

They had followed his instructions down to the letter, and now they find themselves in this storm, all because they had obeyed Jesus and complied with his command. And the same is true today. Sometimes we meet troubles in our lives, and we think to ourselves, this must mean that the Lord doesn't approve of what I'm doing. He's setting up obstacles in my way. Or sometimes we meet

troubles in our lives, and we think to ourselves, I must have done something that the Lord doesn't approve of.

And he's now disciplining me. He's punishing me. And sometimes that can be true. We can think of the story of Jonah. You remember how Jonah was given that definitive commission from the Lord to go and preach to the people of Nineveh. And Jonah had gone in the opposite direction to Joppa, and had made his way to a place called Tarshish. And the Lord had responded to Jonah's disobedience by sending, by hurling a great storm against the boat that Jonah had gone in. But sometimes we meet troubles and trials in our lives. We find ourselves in a storm. And it's precisely because we have complied with the Lord's command. Sometimes the Lord decides to use a storm as the schoolroom of faith in the lives of his people. Sometimes the Lord decides that a storm is the best way of awakening his people to his all-surpassing glory, his all-sufficient grades.

Today, friends, let's remember that if we are following Jesus, we ought to expect troubles and trials. We should be expecting to experience storms that will come crashing on us, just like the wind and the waves that we're smashing against the disciples and their boat. Maybe today, friend, you're in a storm.

[6 : 38] Maybe you've just come through a storm. Maybe you're about to go into a storm. And I want to say at the outset, friend, that that doesn't necessarily mean that the Lord is punishing you, that he is disciplining you. It may be that that storm is the schoolroom of faith in which he is going to do his work in your life.

The stormy night. But we move from the stormy night to a sovereign visitor. Look at verses 25 to 27. Where Matthew now focuses on the sovereign Lord whom the disciples encountered.

Matthew records the approach of Jesus in verses 25 and 26. He begins by drawing our attention to the approach of Jesus in verse 25. And he tells us that Jesus came to the disciples in the fourth watch of the night.

Between 3am and 6am, Jesus comes to the disciples. They have been toiling throughout most of the night. And when they are most worried and when they are most desperate, when they have got nothing more to give, the Lord comes to them.

And isn't that how the Lord so often works? That when he sees that we have got absolutely nothing more to give, when he sees that we are at our emptiest and at our most desperate, then he comes.

[8 : 04] And we read that Jesus came to them in the fourth watch of the night, walking on the sea. The sea in scripture often represents the forces of chaos, the forces of evil.

The sea is the domain over which only the living God has ultimate control and authority over. You see that in Psalm 77. You see that in Job chapter 9.

And now Jesus comes to the disciples, walking on the sea, sobbing over the waves. And it's at that point that Matthew draws their attention to the anxious reaction of the disciples.

Look at verse 26. They see Jesus walking on the sea. I don't know if any of you are fishermen. I don't know if any of you were once fishermen. But these are ordinary fishermen that we meet here in Matthew 14.

They are men of the world. They are men who know that no mere human can walk on water. They have never seen anything like this before. Therefore, ratiocination and reason don't allow for a mere man to walk on water.

[9 : 08] And so they come to the only logical explanation that there could possibly be. And they scream out in fear, it's a ghost. It's a phantom. It's a spirit.

It's a specter. That is the only conclusion that they can come to. And Matthew goes on to record the assurance that came from Jesus. Look at verse 27. Matthew tells us that Jesus immediately spoke to them.

These men are in a storm. They're tired. They're afraid. And Jesus seeks to address their fears by speaking to them.

And Matthew tells us what Jesus said to them. He begins by saying, Take heart. Literally, be of good courage. And he goes on and he says, It is I.

Now, at one level, Jesus is saying to them, I'm here. It's me. It's all okay. But Jesus' words actually go much deeper than this.

[10 : 07] Jesus literally says, I am. I am. Now, some of you might remember in Exodus chapter 3, how the Lord appears to Moses in a burning bush.

And he reveals his name to Moses. And he says to Moses, My name is I am that I am. And then Moses says to him, Lord, when I have to appear before the people of Israel, and they say to me, What God appeared to you?

What is his name? The Lord says to Moses, Say to them, I am has sent me to you. And now here is Jesus, and he's calling out to the disciples in this great storm, while they're at sea, I am.

I am is here. He says to them, Don't be afraid. Why should they not be afraid? Because I am is with you.

The Lord is with you. Now, friends, as we focus on these verses, we're being shown who Jesus really is. Matthew is skillfully presenting and portraying Jesus as the sovereign Lord.

[11 : 20] He's the one who comes to his people in their distresses. He's the one who walks on the water. He's the one who calls out, I am. This is the one who is fully man, but he is more than fully man.

He is also fully divine. He is fully God. He is the Lord. And there is nothing in all creation that isn't under his sovereign control, not even the wind, not even the waves.

In a sermon preached in 2004, John Piper said this, Jesus is supreme in every admirable way over everything, over galaxies and endless reaches of space, over the top, over the earth from the top of Mount Everest, 29,000 feet up to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, 36,000 feet down in the Mariana Trench.

He is supreme over all plants and animals, from the peaceful blue whale to the microscopic killer viruses, over all weather and movements of the earth, hurricanes, tornadoes, monsoons, earthquakes, avalanches, floods, snow, rain, sleep, over all chemical processes that heal and destroy, cancer, AIDS, malaria, flu, and all the workings of antibiotics, and a thousand healing medicines.

He is supreme over all countries and governments and armies, over Al-Qaeda and terrorists and kidnapping, and suicide bombings and beheadings, over all nuclear threats from Iran, Russia, North Korea.

[12 : 54] He is supreme over all politics and elections, over the media, news and entertainment and sport and leisure, over the education and universities and scholarship and science and research, and over all business and finance and industry and manufacturing and transportation, over the internet and information systems.

As Abraham Kuyper once said, there is not a square inch in the whole domain of human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not say mine.

And the question is, friends, do you believe this? Do you believe that the one who was placed in Bethlehem's manger, and then crucified on Calvary's cross, is the one who rules, the one who reigns?

Do you believe that he is the great I am? Do you believe that he is the covenant-making, covenant-keeping God? Do you believe that he is the holy, holy, holy God, whose glory fills and covers the whole earth?

Do you believe that one day, every politician, every president, every prime minister, will bow the knee to Jesus? And even now, even today, he is sustaining the breath in their lungs.

[14 : 13] Do you believe this, friends? Do you believe that Jesus is the sovereign Lord? Do you believe that it is his voice, that is controlling the wind that we are hearing?

His voice, that is controlling the rain, that is lashing on the windows? His voice, that is over what is going on in Russia and Ukraine today? His voice, that is over the cost of living crisis?

His voice, that is over all things? Do you, friends, believe this? But as we focus on these verses, we're also being reminded, of what this sovereign Lord says, to all his people, in all their storms.

Jesus comes to the disciples, as they find themselves in this storm, and he says to them, take heart, it is I, don't be afraid.

And that is what this strong, sovereign, supreme Lord continues to say, to every disciple, in every storm. He comes to them, and the storm is taking place in their homes.

[15 : 21] Difficult marriage. Difficult children. And he says, take heart. It is I. Don't be afraid.

He comes to them in the storms, taking place in their schools. When they think to themselves, I don't know if I can go back to school today. Take heart. It is I.

Don't be afraid. He comes to them in the storms, taking place in their colleges, their universities.

And he says, take heart. It is I. Don't be afraid. He comes to them in the storms, taking place in their

work environment.

Difficult colleagues. Difficult employees. Difficult employers. And he says, take heart. It is I. Don't be afraid.

He comes to them in the storms, taking place in their financial situations, their health situations. And he says, take heart. It is I.

[16:22] Don't be afraid. He comes to them in the storm, taking place in the hospital ward. And he says, take heart. It is I. Don't be afraid. He comes to them in the care home.

When they don't remember their children. When they don't remember their spouse. When they might not even remember him. And he says, take heart.

It is I. Don't be afraid. And he comes to them in the final storm. The storm at the end of their lives. The storm of death.

And he says, take heart. It is I. Don't be afraid. Can I say to you today, friend? Whatever storm you might be going through.

As an individual Christian. Or even as a congregation. You have this strong, sovereign, supreme Jesus.

[17:21] Who calls out to you in that storm. Take heart. It is I. Don't be afraid. You have a sovereign Lord.

Who is with you. And then third and finally, we have a sinking disciple. Look at verses 28 to 33. Where Matthew now focuses on the sinking faith of one of the disciples.

Matthew draws his attention to the walk of Peter. Verses 28 to 31. We can begin by noting Peter's request and Jesus' response. Verses 28 and 29.

Peter has just seen and heard Jesus and he now blouts out, Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water. He literally says, Lord, since it is you, command me to come to you on the water.

Peter is a man who loves Jesus. And he wants to be where Jesus is. He is not content to sit in the boat and wait for Jesus to come. If Jesus is out there, he is going out there.

[18:25] And he says, Lord, if it is you, since it is you, command me to come to you on the water. And Jesus replies, come. What music for Peter's ears.

Jesus, his friend and his Lord, the one whom he has left everything behind to follow, has just said, come. And Peter steps out of the boat and starts walking on the water toward Jesus.

Then we see Peter sinking in Jesus' salvation. Verses 30 and 31. Peter has been walking on the water. He isn't far from Jesus when all of a sudden he sees the wind.

My wife, I can say this because she's not here today. My wife, Natalie and I are very different. And when we're on the ferry, I just focus on getting the curry or the, they've now got chilli pot dogs on the ferry.

It's great. I just make for the kitchen area and then I look out the window and I watch the hills of Loch Rume getting further and further away and I see the lights of Stornoway getting clearer and clearer.

[19:32] I love watching the waves smashing against the ferry. I absolutely love it. She, she can't cope. She can't cope. She just hates seeing the wind, hates seeing the waves.

She, she, she doesn't like it. And here we have Peter and Peter is looking at the wind. He's looking at the waves. He sees the sea spray and the crashing waves.

He, he sees their boat bobbing up and down. He hears the howl of the gale, the roar of the sea. He feels the breeze on his face, tastes the salt water on his lips and he becomes afraid.

You know, if Jesus had started to sink, then Peter would have a reason to be afraid. Or if Jesus had withdrawn his invitation to come, then Peter would have a reason to be afraid. But Peter becomes afraid for the simple reason that he has taken his eyes off Jesus.

And he begins to sink and he cries out, Lord, save me. And in that very moment, Jesus reaches out his hand, takes hold of Peter, saves him from drowning and says to him, oh, you of little faith, why did you die?

[20:33] Matthew goes on to move our attention from the walk of Peter to the worship of the disciples. Look at verses 32 to 33. Matthew tells us that when Jesus and Peter got back into the boat, the wind ceased.

He doesn't explicitly say that Jesus calmed the storm, but we know from Matthew chapter 8 that Jesus is the one who has calmed storms in the past so that there is a great calm. And now as soon

as Jesus steps into the boat like a regal king ascending into his throne, the wind ceases. And Matthew closes by telling us the disciples worship him saying, truly, you are the son of God. They have seen him now walking on the water. They have heard his words, take heart, it is I, don't be afraid. They have watched him rescue Peter from drowning. They have seen the wind cease as soon as he steps into their boat and all they can see in response is, truly, you are the son of God. They are putting him in the highest possible category that they have. They are saying that Jesus is uniquely related to the one true God. They are beginning to see that this Jesus, the one who came from Nazareth, is indeed Lord of all creation.

[21 : 56] Now friends, as we focus on these verses, we've been given a picture. And we've been given a picture of what happens when faith falters. Look at what happens with Peter.

One minute he's looking to Jesus, walking on the water. The next minute he's looking at the wind, succumbing to fear, sinking beneath the waves. And the same can be true of us.

Jesus is a great object of our faith. The one who calls each and every person to come to him. And the writer to the Hebrews tells us that we live the Christian life, we run the Christian race, looking away from everything and looking to Jesus.

But sometimes, sometimes we take our eyes off this Jesus. We start looking around us rather than at him. And when we start focusing on other things rather than him, we start to sink.

And that can happen even after we've made a good deal of progress in the Christian life. Don't you find it significant that Peter walked to within touching distance of Jesus before he took his eyes off him?

[23 : 10] It wasn't when he just stepped out of the boat, he had made a good deal of progress, then took his eyes off Jesus and started to sink.

Perhaps you're sitting here today and you know that you've taken your eyes off Jesus. and you can say today, yeah, I'm sinking.

I'm sitting in church with my suit on or my hat on, but I'm sinking. Perhaps you know someone in your life who's taken the rise of Jesus because they've begun and they've begun to sink.

Maybe someone you used to sit with in this church. Maybe someone who's sitting in the church even today and you know they're sinking because they've taken the rise of Jesus.

Faith can falter. But these verses also give us a wonderful picture of a faithful saviour who doesn't falter. Look at how Jesus responds to Peter in these verses.

[24 : 25] Peter is sinking and screaming, Lord, save me. And Jesus doesn't turn away from him in disappointment. Jesus doesn't turn away from him in disgust. Jesus doesn't even say to him, come along man, get yourself together, sort yourself out.

Jesus immediately reaches out his hand and takes hold of Peter. What an encouragement that should be for every Christian who has begun to sink.

Here is the saviour who is gentle and lowly in heart and he reaches out his hand to take hold of those who are sinking. Other people might have become exasperated with you.

Other people might have given up on you. Other people might not be talking to you. But Jesus says, I will never leave you. I will never forsake you.

My dear sinking friend, you are not alone today. Peter knew what it was to sink. And if I was to be honest with you, I've known what it is to sink.

[25 : 27] And I'm sure if every elder in this building was really honest, they would say, they have known what it is to sink. But there is a Lord who knows what it is to reach down and rescue every sinking follower who is willing to cry out, Lord, save me.

What an encouragement that should be if you're sitting here today in that sinking place that there is a faithful Lord who will not leave you. He will not forsake you. He will reach down.

He will rescue you when you are crying out, Lord, save me. And what an encouragement that should be if you're not a Christian today. You might be holding back from Jesus because you're afraid that you'll let him down.

You're afraid that you'll disappoint him. You're afraid that you'll never be able to keep it up. And today I am presenting you with a saviour, a faithful saviour who will not leave you.

He will not forsake you. I'm presenting you with a saviour who has never refused to cry, Lord, save me when a person feels like they're sinking. I'm presenting you with a saviour who will take you back again and again and again.

[26 : 41] I am presenting you with a saviour who holds celebrations. And he holds celebrations not over how faithful his people have been, but when the wandering sheep come back to the fold.

And the wayward sons return to the home. And so I ask you today, friend, if you're sitting here and you are not a Christian, what is holding you back from coming to such a faithful and gentle saviour? What is keeping you back? What is holding you back from stepping out of the boat in response to the one who says, come.

May the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let's close by singing to us praise the words of Psalm 107. Psalm 107, the Scottish Psalter version singing verses 27 to 30.

I think your minister calls this the sailor's psalm. He seems to give a title to every psalm. And this is what he calls the sailor's psalm. And we're going to sing verses 27 to 30 of these verses.

[28 : 02] How was it? 27 to 30. 20. 20. 20. 20. 20. 20. 23. Yes. I can't even read my writing anymore. This is terrible. Or maybe it's smudged with the rain.

I don't know. But anyway, verses 23 to 30. Who go to sea in ships and in great waters trading thee within the deep these men God's works and his great wonders see.

For he commands and forth in haste the stormy tempest flies which makes the sea with rolling waves a lot to swell and rise. In verses 29 and 30. The storm is changed into a calm at his command and will so that the waves which raged before now quiet are and still.

Then are they glad because it rests and quiet now they be. So to the haven he then brings which they desire to see. Psalm 107 verses 23 to 30. We'll stand to sing JO Giselle.

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[32 : 23] Lord and our God we give you praise and thanks that there is one who is sovereign over the storms over the waves one who calls out to every sinking disciple every distressed follower take heart it is I don't be afraid and we pray that each and every one of us today might be very conscious and very aware of the fact that this Jesus is indeed King of Kings and Lord of Lords sovereign over all things supreme in all things and not only would we be those who are conscious that he is that great cosmic Lord but we would also be those who are able to take heart from knowing that wherever we might find ourselves whatever storm we might be in he goes into it with all his people that he is the one who has promised that he will never leave and will never forsake them let us go away from this place oh Lord fixing our eyes ever more on this Jesus whatever other distractions and disturbances may be going on in our lives and bring us again together this evening with a renewed desire to magnify your name as we pray in Jesus name

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