

Faith and Doubt

Matthew 14:22-33

The Bible takes a very realistic attitude toward doubting. On the one hand, the Bible acknowledges that good-hearted, God-honoring people have doubts. Psalm 73 is a good example of this; Asaph describes how he almost turned away from God. When he saw the prosperity of the wicked, he began to think that obeying God was pointless (verses 13-14). The fact that the Bible itself gives voice to people's doubts reflects that doubting is common and normal in this life.

Of course there are many different types of doubts. Some people have intellectual doubts about Christianity and the teachings of the Bible. I've talked with a guy about a month ago who flat out told me that he thinks it's "silly" to use ancient documents (i.e. the Bible) as your guide to truth. That is unbelief. But followers of Christ can entertain doubts about whether or not certain the Scriptures are true, whether or not the teachings of Jesus are true.

Other people have doubts based on their experience, especially their accumulated disappointments. Some people go through suffering and disappointment and emerge with a deeper and more tender faith. But others emerge with doubt: "Is God really for me? Is God really with me? Or is this all a mirage?"

Scripture never tells us to ignore our doubts or to "stuff them." To the contrary, Scriptures such as the one we'll consider today suggest that we name our doubts and address them directly. Jude 22 even tells us to show mercy to those who are doubting. On the one hand, Scripture acknowledges that doubting is normal and advocates a gracious approach to others who doubt.

But on the other hand, the Scriptures ***don't*** exalt doubting as a virtue (as is sometimes done in the world). Scriptures urges us to address our doubts so that we can live by faith. The presence of doubt reflects a deficiency in faith, a lack of confidence in God. In James 1, for example, we are told that if we "lack wisdom" we should "ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind . . . double-minded . . . unstable in all his ways."

Peter's Doubt: Walking on Water, Sinking, and Crying Out (Matthew 14:22-33)

Today's passage is Matthew 14:22-33, the account of Jesus (and Peter) walking on the water. We will see how Jesus compassionately confronts Peter's doubt and points him toward faith. Given the mission Jesus had for Peter and the other disciples, they needed to move past doubt to a place of deep, abiding confidence in Jesus and His word. Surely the same is true for each of us here today.

The previous passage explains how Jesus had fed the 5,000 by multiplying the five loaves and two fish. As we'll see, Jesus expected His disciples to learn from His miracles; they were supposed to take into account yesterday's miracles when they

faced today's troubles. In this way their faith would grow. Because of His track record, they would have a growing confidence in Jesus.

Verse 22 tells us that Jesus made the disciples cross the Sea of Galilee without Him.

22 Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away.

Here in Matthew we aren't told why Jesus made the disciples go ahead of Him. It may be that He was creating the conditions that would allow Him to approach them walking on the water. It may be that He wanted the disciples to leave so that they wouldn't be caught up in the crowd's desire to make Him king (John 6:15). But perhaps the immediate reason was that He wanted time away from everybody, including the disciples, so He could pray.

23 After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone.

Jesus looked for opportunities to pull away and talk with His heavenly Father.

24 But the boat was already a long distance from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary.

The other gospel accounts confirm that the boat was in the middle of the lake and the winds kept the disciples from getting to the other side. Verse 25 states rather matter-of-factly what happened next:

25 And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea.

The Romans divided the time between sunset and sunrise into four periods or watches. The fourth watch would have been between 3 and 6 a.m. Not surprisingly, we read in verse 26:

26 When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.

Never having seen a human walking on water, they were terrified and concluded that they were seeing a "ghost" (a term used only here and in Mark 6:49, Mark's account of this event). They thought they were seeing a spiritual being hovering over the water.

We see Jesus' compassion when we read:

27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid."

Bracketed by the commands “take courage” and “do not be afraid” is Jesus’ statement, “It is I” - which could be translated “I am.” It’s possible Jesus is making a veiled claim to be divine, God-in-the-flesh.

In the other gospels that record this event (Mark and John), the account concludes here with the emphasis on Jesus’ identity. But Matthew’s account continues, shining the spotlight on Peter’s **response** to Jesus walking on the water. What we read next has implications for us as we seek to move past our doubts and grow deeper in our faith/confidence in God.

28 Peter said to Him, “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.”

We sometimes give Peter a hard time because he was so often so wrong. But you’ve got to love his transparency and his boldness. Peter was the only one who had the desire to walk on water. Nobody else said, “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.” Jesus was not offended by Peter’s bold request. Jesus did exactly as Peter had asked:

29 And He said, “Come!” And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus.

As Peter asked, Jesus commanded Peter to come to Him. Matthew very matter-of-factly states that Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. Peter exercised faith; since Jesus commanded him to walk on the water, he believed that Jesus would enable him to obey. By faith he got out of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. Verse 30, however, describes what Jesus would label “doubt.”

30 But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”

When Peter took his eyes off of Jesus and looked at the wind whipping up the waves, “he became frightened” and began to sink. In his book entitled “Not by Sight,” Jon Bloom points out that “Peter the Rock (see Matthew 16:18) didn’t sink like a rock” (p. 99). Apparently Peter sank slowly; he “began to sink.” To his credit - and this is vital for everyone who doubts - he didn’t cry out to the disciples in the boat to save him; he cried out, “Lord, save me!” In His mercy Jesus did just that.

31 Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Understanding that Jesus was/is full of grace and truth, we probably shouldn’t hear Jesus speaking in an angry voice. Rather, we should hear compassion and kindness in Jesus’ voice, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Jesus wasn’t condemning Peter for having doubt. He was merely diagnosing him. Peter had enough faith to step out of the boat and begin walking on the water, but ultimately he didn’t believe that Jesus was more powerful than the wind (and the waves). He doubted whether or not Jesus could

enable him to keep walking on the water. Compared to what it could be, he had “little faith.”

Again, in His compassion Jesus didn’t allow Peter to go all the way under. He stretched out His hand and took hold of him. Together they stepped into the boat.

32 When they got into the boat, the wind stopped. 33 And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, “You are certainly God’s Son!”

The lesson was over. The point had been made. Jesus was indeed more powerful than the wind. He can be trusted during the storms of life (and not just before and after). The disciples recognized this and worshiped Him, saying, “You are certainly God’s Son!”

Out Doubt. The goal for this sermon series is for us as individuals and as a church to grow deeper in our faith. We’re not merely wanting to gather more facts about faith; we want to grow in our confidence and trust in God Himself. Toward that end, before we consider the implications of this passage for our lives, I’d like you to identify a specific area of your life in which you need God to work. It could be any number of things:

- You are brokenhearted over some relationship in your life. You need God to mend your heart and give you joy again.
- You are dealing with an addiction or compulsion or destructive habit. You really need God to give you the capacity to be obedient long-term (not just for a few days or weeks).
- You are carrying some burden that’s weighing you down. Perhaps somebody you love is in a really bad place.
- You are reaching out to someone who needs the life that only Jesus can give. You care deeply about this person and can’t imagine them experiencing time and eternity without God.
- You are fearful about your future. Your core relationships aren’t what you imagined they would be; your career path is very uncertain; you’re not sure you’re going to have enough money to live and/or to retire.

And all of these circumstances expose our doubts if we let them.

You don’t merely need to “suck it up” and try hard. You need confidence that God is willing and able to give you all the grace you need or simply intervene and do what’s needed. If we take Peter’s experience as a paradigm, here are three ways to move from doubt to faith.

Step out of the boat and begin walking on the water. Remember that Peter’s doubt never would have been exposed if he hadn’t taken the risk and stepped out of the boat. And remember that he first checked with Jesus to see if doing so was His will. He said, “Jesus, command me to come to You on the water.”

When we “step out of the boat,” we take action based on our best understanding of the will of God. We search the Scriptures and get counsel from other believers and pray for

God's leading. We have an abundance of wisdom and guidance available if we want to step out of the boat.

Some examples:

- If you are fearful about the future, you might hear Jesus' command in Matthew 7 which says, "Ask, seek, and knock. Those who ask receive, those who seek find, and those who knock have the door opened." Stepping out of the boat may mean seeking God in a very intentional, deliberate way.
- If you're battling some addiction or destructive habit, you might seek to experience what Paul described in Philippians 4 when he wrote, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Stepping out of the boat might involve finding an accountability relationship or group that can help you get to the place where you can say what Paul said.
- If you're brokenhearted or you're experiencing some loss, you might take your cues from Psalm 147:3 when says that the Lord "heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." Stepping out of the boat for you might mean taking advantage of a recovery ministry such as Divorce Care or reaching out to our Stephen Ministry so that you can be paired with someone who will walk with you through your loss. These ministries are designed to allow the body of Christ to do what it does best.

Take action based on Scripture, the counsel of others, and the Spirit's leading.

Notice when you're "sinking" and name your doubts. Peter's doubt was exposed as he walked on the water. He took his eyes off of Jesus; he became frightened and began to sink. Jesus labeled this doubt: Peter doubted Jesus' ability to enable him to walk on the water. Until he understood this, he couldn't grow in his faith.

In a similar way we need to notice when we take our eyes off of Jesus, when our troubles look more powerful than Jesus, and when we're "sinking." At that point we need to name our doubts. The goal is to move past these doubts. If we allow our doubts to take root in our hearts, we can become cynical people. Unlike Peter who cried out to Jesus, we can become arrogant in our cynicism. We can have pockets of unbelief that sabotage everything God wants to do in our lives. Instead, we should name our doubts in order to move past them by the power of the Holy Spirit.

You may take your eyes off of Jesus and doubt that God is really willing and able to provide for your future. Like Asaph in Psalm 73, you may doubt whether there's any profit in seeking God because it appears that those who don't seek God have the easiest life.

If you're dealing with a destructive habit, you might take your eyes off of Jesus and become fixated on your flesh or your temptation. When you begin sinking you may need to admit, "I'm not sure I believe that God's grace is greater than my cravings. I tend to think that my flesh is stronger than God's power in my life. I can't really say honestly, 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.'"

If you're brokenhearted, if you take your eyes off of Jesus you will begin sinking. Perhaps you will need to admit that you doubt whether or not God is with you and for you: "Jesus, You promised that You wouldn't leave us as orphans, but that's how I feel right now." You doubt God's presence and God's goodness in your life.

Keep learning from Jesus and crying out to Him. When sinking, Peter didn't call out to the other disciples in the boat. He cried out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!" That's a great prayer to memorize and to pray whenever needed. In Mark's account of Jesus walking on the water, Mark mentions that the disciples "had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves" (Mark 6:52). The implication is that their insight (and therefore their faith) should have grown with every experience of Jesus' faithfulness.

Surely the same thing should be true for us: As we notice Jesus' track-record of faithfulness in our lives, we should gain insight and grow more confident in Him. We do this individually and in community. If you have serious doubts in some area, you need to be very careful what you do. Don't surround yourself only with other people who share your doubts; if you only talk with others who doubt you may be confirmed in your doubt, and you may end up in unbelief. Find others who've worked through their doubts to the point of faith. You need the wisdom and encouragement of others who can help you address your doubts. You will rarely get past your doubts by yourself.

As we come to the Lord's table this morning, I would encourage you to bring your need to God in prayer. If you can identify doubts, admit them to God. Don't hide them or pretend they don't exist. Bring them into the light. See them in light of the body and blood of Jesus, in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Lord's Table reminds us that faith isn't believing in an impersonal force. Faith is confidence/trust in the One who gave His life for you. Surely the One who died on your behalf and rose again on the third day can be trusted in every situation. Surely He is for you and with you. Say to Jesus what the disciples said: "You are certainly God's Son."

If you are a believer in Jesus, we invite you to join us at the Lord's table. Please hold the bread until all have received and we'll eat together. If you need allergen-free bread, you will find that in the center of the trays. We will pass the cup and then drink together when all have received.