

OpenTheo

Matthew 14:22 - 14:33



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg discusses the story of Jesus walking on water in Matthew 14:22–33. While some skeptics try to explain the event away as a physical trick, Steve suggests that it was likely a manifestation of Jesus' supernatural power. He also emphasizes the importance of believers walking in the way Jesus did, living a holy life of obedience, love, and compassion with the help of the Holy Spirit. Such living is impossible in the flesh, but through faith and dependence on Jesus, we can walk as he walked.

Transcript

We're beginning today reading in Matthew chapter 14 and beginning at verse 22. This is immediately after the feeding of the 5,000 with five loaves and two fishes, which was in the paragraph, the story preceding this passage. Immediately, Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side while he sent the multitudes away.

And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. Now, when evening came, he was alone there. But the boat was now in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary.

Now, in the fourth watch of the night, Jesus went to them walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a ghost. And they cried out for fear.

But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, Be of good cheer, it is I, do not be afraid. And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water. So he said, Come.

And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid, and beginning to sink, he cried out, saying, Lord, save me. And immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught him and said to him, Oh, you of little faith, why did you doubt? And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

And those who were in the boat came and worshiped him, saying, Truly, you are the Son

of God. Now, this story of Jesus walking on the water is certainly well known, even people who are not very familiar with the Gospels and the Bible itself are aware that it is said that Jesus walked on water. In fact, it has become an idiom in our culture that if somebody seems perfect without flaw, some people say they practically walk on water, which means, of course, that they are almost as flawless as Jesus.

Obviously, that isn't true of anybody except for Jesus. But that's a saying which reflects the familiarity of our culture with this story of Jesus walking on the water. Now, other Gospels also record this story, though the idea of Peter walking on the water is not found in the other Gospels.

Only Matthew records that part. But it's a very interesting story. And, of course, if it is true, which I accept it is entirely true, it certainly demonstrates that Jesus was something other than a mere man, that he was... I mean, a man cannot walk on water.

Water does not allow it unless it's frozen. And this water was not frozen. So we have this story of Jesus showing his superiority over the forces of nature.

It's a little bit like the story of Jesus calming the storm in another place where he stood up and told the storm to be still, and it was. These are cases that are not like the miracles of healing in the Bible. Miracles of healing can be explained in many ways by the skeptic.

Of course, we who believe in the Bible believe that Jesus literally and supernaturally and immediately healed people of real organic sicknesses. Though a skeptic might say that in the case of healings, that maybe the sicknesses in some cases were psychosomatic. Maybe it was just a case of a mind over matter kind of a cure.

However, walking on water does not allow that kind of an explanation, nor does giving commands to the wind and the sea and having them obey him. There cannot be a case where the mind of the sea is somehow influenced by him. It is very clearly the case that Jesus is demonstrating himself to be the Lord over nature, as well as the Lord over everything else.

And so he walks on top of the water, and eventually so does Peter for a little while. There's much to consider in this story that is instructive to us, in my opinion. And I'd like to begin looking at some of the earlier verses we read and go on through the story, making a few pertinent comments.

In verse 22, it said, immediately, Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side while he sent the multitudes away. It does not say here what was so urgent about this. Why did Jesus immediately send the multitudes away after he fed them? And yet over in the parallel story in the Gospel of John, we do have some information on that.

It would appear that in John chapter 6, in verse 15, Jesus, after he fed the multitudes, perceived that the multitudes were being hyped up into a frenzy with the desire to take him forcibly and make him king. Now, of course, this would involve them staging a revolt against Rome, because the Romans had conquered Palestine 100 years earlier, and, of course, Caesar was the king. And for them to declare Jesus as the king would be tantamount to a revolt against the power of Rome.

Now, it's not so much that Jesus was afraid of such a revolt against Rome as if, you know, he couldn't handle the Romans. If he could handle the ocean or the sea, he could certainly handle any number of armies. But that wasn't the issue.

The problem was that the Jews wanted Jesus to be the kind of king that they were looking for, and he came to be a king in another sense. They thought he was going to be a king like David, who actually did sit and rule on a throne in Jerusalem, and was a visible ruler there over a political empire. But Jesus came to be a king in another sense.

He came to sit on the throne at the right hand of God the Father, and to be enthroned in the hearts of his followers, so that his kingdom was not of this world. His kingdom was a spiritual kingdom, and he was not looking to be enthroned in a physical throne. And so we read in John's Gospel in the parallel that when Jesus perceived that the people were about to take him forcibly and make him king, he actually sent the multitudes away.

Apparently they were not organized enough. He could sense there was some talk going on. Hey, we should organize this multitude and stage a revolt against Rome.

And before this effort could be organized very thoroughly, Jesus dismissed the crowd and scattered them, sent them their various ways. And he took his disciples, no doubt in order to keep them from getting caught up in this frenzy, and told them to get in the boat and pass on to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Now, Jesus was on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee when the miracle of the loaves had occurred, and he was sending them back to the west side where they lived in Capernaum.

But he was not going with them. He sent them in the boat across the sea, but he stayed on the eastern shore and went up in a mountain to pray into the night. The disciples must have been somewhat perplexed by his command to go without him.

Although it is not impossible that he could walk around the northern end of the lake, the Sea of Galilee, and meet them on the other side. In fact, that's exactly what many in the multitudes did. They did go around that way, and perhaps the disciples expected Jesus to do the same.

Although they must not have known why it would be that he would send them on their way without him, and he would stay on the other side. Well, we don't know exactly why he did either. All we know is that on the other side, he spent his time in prayer, until

fairly late into the night.

And by the time he was finished praying and wished to rejoin the disciples, they were out in the midst of the sea rowing against stiff winds, because a bit of a storm had come up. There were winds against them. And so Jesus came out to them into the middle of the sea, walking on the water.

In verse 25, we read it was in the fourth watch of the night. Now, when you read of the fourth watch of the night, this is referring to the Jewish way of reckoning the passage of time in the night. The night was divided into four watches from six o'clock in the evening to nine o'clock in the evening was the first watch.

The next three hours from nine till midnight was the second watch. Then from midnight to three in the morning would be the third watch, and the fourth watch would be from three in the morning to six in the morning. So even though we don't have an exact time given, we know that Jesus came to them somewhere between three o'clock in the morning and six in the morning.

And he had been praying, apparently stayed awake all night, and was praying up on the mountain until that time. Now, that whole time, the disciples were straining against the wind and the oars, trying to get to the other side of the sea, as Jesus had told them to, but had not really made that much progress, had only gotten out into the midst of it. Now, it says in verse 25 that Jesus went to them walking on the sea.

Now, the most natural way to understand that is that Jesus walked right on top of the water. And yet there are people who feel that that is not the way we are to understand it. For one thing, one commentator I read some time ago indicated that walking on the sea really meant walking alongside of the sea, on the seashore.

In fact, there are places in the Bible where that expression is used, talking about something taking place on the sea, where we would say at the sea or at the seashore. And so one commentator is trying to tell us that Jesus was not walking on top of the water, but he was walking on the sea, that is, on the edge of the sea, along the seashore. However, it might solve the problem of the supernatural for part of the story if we took it that way, not that I really feel there is a problem with the supernatural, but this commentary apparently thought there was.

But what does that do with Peter walking on the water? Certainly, it does not indicate that Peter was walking on the seashore when he left the boat and was in the midst of the sea. It seems clear that this convention of going to change the meaning of the words to remove the miracle doesn't really satisfy all the necessities of the story to do so. We have a miracle here, and that's quite obvious.

Now, there are others who've tried to explain it away this way. They say, well, Jesus

appeared to be walking on top of the water, but in fact, he was walking on top of a reef, a shallow reef that was near the top of the water and sort of walking on top of the rock there. And it was something that the disciples apparently were not familiar with, the reef, but Jesus was, and it just so happened this reef ran out toward the boat so that Jesus was walking along the top of this reef and appeared to be walking on top of the water.

Well, again, this is a very ingenious suggestion. However, it does not really satisfy the historical information. The disciples, you will remember, had spent their entire adult lives on that sea.

They were fishermen, and that is the place they fished, and they certainly knew the sea well enough to know whether there were some reefs there. I mean, they would have had to be aware of them because of their boats. But if they knew of such a reef there, they would not be so shocked to see someone walking out like that.

They would say, oh, he's apparently walking on the reef, but they didn't know of any such reef, which gives us good reason to believe there was none at all there. In any case, I think that the attempt to eliminate the miraculous from the story misses the point. The whole point of the story is that this was miraculous and that Jesus was demonstrating himself to be a man who was not like other men, a man who could do what men cannot do.

He could define nature because he was supernatural, which means he superseded nature. And that is the point of the story, to try to find ways to make his walking on the water not really a supernatural event. We might as well just throw the story out rather than try to reinterpret it because the story is about a miracle.

And if we don't want to believe in miracles, we might as well just discredit the story rather than trying to find ways to reconstruct it. In any case, the disciples, when they saw him coming, it says in verse 26, when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled saying, it's a ghost. Now, again, they wouldn't necessarily have that reaction if he was just walking along the seashore, nor would they likely have that reaction if they knew that he was walking on a reef.

They saw what appeared to be a phantom walking on top of the water. Now, it's not that Jesus appeared to be a real ghost. It's simply that they assumed that any form that could remain on top of the water without sinking must not be physical, must be a spirit merely.

And they cried out for fear, but immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, be of good cheer, it is I, do not be afraid. Now, even then, it's hard to know whether they fully believed that it was him because Peter's response was, Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water. Now, it's not clear exactly why Peter had this specific response.

I'm not sure what was going through Peter's mind, but it is possible that he was simply wanting to walk like Jesus walked. You know, the Bible says in 1 John 2, 6, it says, he that says he abides in Christ ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked. That is to say, we who are Christians are supposed to walk the same way Jesus did.

And you know that walking in the Bible is a metaphor for living. That we are to walk by faith means we live by faith. That we walk in love means we live in love.

That we walk in the spirit means we live through the spirit. Walking is simply a metaphor for living. Now, in this case, of course, we're talking about literal walking.

Jesus was walking literally on top of water, and Peter wanted to walk as Jesus walked. Perhaps the story itself serves as something of a metaphor too, because Jesus walked as other men cannot walk. And yet we are told in 1 John 2, 6, that we should walk even as he walked.

Well, how can we do this? Even if we're not considering walking on water, if we're considering living a holy life, loving our enemies, having the kind of compassion and even usefulness and supernatural power manifested in our lives that Jesus did, how can we walk like that? We don't have the power in ourselves to do that. And that's true, we don't. But interestingly enough, Peter didn't have the power in himself to walk on water either, but he did it.

The point here is that Jesus walked in the spirit. That is, he walked in the power of the Holy Spirit. We know this from many things that the Gospels tell us, and the epistles also.

Jesus said that when he cast out demons, he did it by the spirit of God. In Acts 1, verse 1, it says that Jesus, when he taught his disciples, he taught them through the spirit. That is, it was the Holy Spirit operating through him.

Now, that same Holy Spirit operates in believers, although there are very few believers I've known who seem to walk in the spirit with the kind of consistency that Jesus did, because Jesus did so every moment of every day, and most believers are not quite so perfect at it. But the point is that the same power through which Jesus did his miraculous works is given to his people now, and we have that Holy Spirit in us too. And if we walk in the spirit, the scripture indicates we can do things that we could not naturally do.

For example, we cannot naturally resist the power of sin in our lives. We have sin in our nature. Paul talks about it in Romans chapter 7, how that he says, I desire to do what is right, but I end up not doing it at times.

And there's times I certainly have resolved not to do wrong, but I end up doing wrong anyway. He says, with my mind, I agree that the law of God is good, and I embrace it, and I want it. But he says, I find at work in my members, in my body, another law that

brings me into bondage to sin and death so that I really can't overcome.

And what Paul seems to be saying is that in our natural state, we cannot stop sinning. We can't just by our choice decide I won't sin anymore, and then we live a perfect life. It's beyond our power as human beings because of this other law in our members.

But when you proceed from Romans 7, where Paul makes those comments, to Romans 8 and verse 4, he says that the righteous requirements of the law can be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. Now, notice Paul says in Romans 8, 4, that if we are walking not according to the flesh, and he means by that not walking in our natural ability or natural power or resolve, but we're walking in the Spirit, which means we're being empowered by the Spirit and being led by the Spirit, then if we're walking by the Spirit, he says the righteous requirements of the law are fulfilled in us. Now, see, that's what couldn't happen in Romans 7. In Romans 7, he wanted to keep the righteous requirements of the law, but he couldn't.

But when we walk in the Spirit, we can. And what that means is that the requirement of living like Jesus and living a life as obedient to God as Jesus lived and as loving and as perfect and patient and all of that as Jesus was, it is impossible for us in our flesh to do that. The Christian life is not difficult.

It is impossible. A person cannot live the Christian life in his natural resources, and that is why God has not left us to our natural resources. God has given us of His Spirit, and we are told to walk in the Spirit.

And when we do, we are walking as Jesus did. Jesus walked in the Spirit. As we walk in the power of the Holy Spirit, we walk as He walked.

Now, I believe this walking on water, although I believe it's an entirely true story in its literal sense, I believe that it happened possibly as a lesson to us, as a metaphor of this other kind of walking. Since the Bible says we are required to walk as Jesus walked, then it is essential that we walk supernaturally. Now, when I say walk supernaturally, I don't mean that we need to go out onto our swimming pool and see if we can walk on top of the water.

That's not really the kind of walking that God calls most of us to. What God calls us to do, however, is to walk supernaturally in holiness and in power and victory over sin in our lives. That is something we cannot do naturally, and therefore it must be done through the supernatural assistance of the Holy Spirit.

Now, I think that Peter's desire to walk on the water was commendable. Now, the other disciples might not have thought it was commendable. You know, Peter was always kind of an impulsive guy.

He blurted out comments without thinking and later had to eat humble pie because of it

on many occasions. He was always the one to quickly do something first and think about it later. I mean, he was the one who grabbed a sword and cut off the ear of Malchus, the high priest's servant, in the garden, and Jesus had to rebuke him for that.

None of the other disciples had done that. Peter was always doing impulsive and impetuous things. And so when Peter said, Lord, if that's you, let me walk on the water.

Command me to walk on the water. The other disciples probably rolled their eyes and thought, oh, there goes Peter again doing some zany, crazy thing for which he'll probably have to be rebuked. And interestingly enough, Jesus said to him, come.

Peter said, Lord, if it's you, command me to walk on the water. And Jesus said to him, come. And it says, and when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus.

But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid and beginning to sink, he cried out saying, Lord, save me. And immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught him and said to him, oh, you of little faith. Why did you doubt? Now, Peter did get himself rebuked after all.

But notice he did not get rebuked for wanting to walk on the water. He did not get rebuked for saying, Lord, let me walk on the water. He was rebuked because he did not continue to walk in faith and succeed.

You see, it did not apparently offend Jesus that Peter wanted to walk on the water like Jesus did. No doubt Jesus wished that all the disciples desired to have the same kind of walk that Jesus had. But what Peter was rebuked for was that although he wanted to walk on the water, he did not keep the faith.

His faith in Christ was not steady enough to prevent him from sinking. Now, you see, Peter did successfully walk on the water, but there's a couple of things we need to observe about this. One is that he did not do so without a command from Christ.

He said, Lord, if you want me to come, you command me. You see, when God commands you to do something, then he has to, you know, the enablement comes with the command. God doesn't command you to do something and then not allow you to do it.

If you have a command from God, then that which would otherwise be impossible is something you can do if you put your faith in his command. Secondly, you have to keep the faith. You have to continue to trust in it step by step.

You may walk successfully for a few minutes or a few hours or a few days, but you can fall as soon as your faith fails you. That was Peter's problem. We need to keep our faith in the command of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit to help us to walk the way Jesus walked.

And that, I believe, is the intended lesson of this story about Jesus and Peter walking on the water. Well, of course, Jesus got into the boat and the boat eventually got to the other side. And that's the end of this little story and the lessons I think we have captured.