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Matthew 8:23 - 8:27



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this analysis of Matthew 8:23-8:27, Steve Gregg explores the story of Jesus calming a storm while on a boat with his disciples. The story illustrates the true identity of Jesus, though not immediately understood by his disciples. As Gregg notes, Jesus' power to calm the storm with a rebuke demonstrates his divine authority, which was a source of amazement to his disciples. Further, Gregg suggests that there is some possibility that the storm was not a natural occurrence, but rather a product of spiritual forces that Jesus rebuked. Ultimately, Gregg argues that this story provides powerful evidence of Jesus' divine identity and his authority over natural and spiritual forces.

Transcript

Let's look at Matthew chapter 8 together and check out this story that begins at verse 23 about the life of Jesus. We are studying through the Gospel of Matthew currently in our study of the life of Jesus, and we're seeing the things that he did and said 2,000 years ago and trying to see what impact they may have upon us and what they tell us about God and about our own lives. Now, in Matthew 8, 23, the story continues from what we were talking about last time.

Jesus had spent a night healing in Capernaum, and a large crowd was gathering to him, and Jesus, I think, suspected that they weren't all there for the right reasons. They weren't all there because they were committed to the kingdom of God, but they were coming because of the sensational miracles of which they were hearing. And so he decided to get into the boat and cross the sea, the Sea of Galilee.

And so as he was getting into the boat, a couple of men came up to him and offered to go with him, but he put them off, it would appear, by telling what the cost of discipleship would be and the nature of the commitment that it takes to follow him. And now he gets into the boat. And we read beginning in verse 23, Now, when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him, and suddenly a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with waves.

But he was asleep. Then his disciples came to him and woke him, saying, Lord, save us,

we are perishing. But he said to them, Why are you fearful, O you of little faith? Then he arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm.

And the men marveled, saying, Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey him? Now, this is a great story, and I believe every word of it, of course. It is a true story, and yet it is illustrative of something very important. The disciples had begun to follow Jesus because they believed he was the Messiah.

Now, we have to realize that the word Messiah, which is of course the same word as the word Christ, Messiah comes from the Hebrew and Christ from the Greek, but they are equivalent to each other. When we call Jesus Christ, it is the same thing as saying Jesus the Messiah. But the Messiah was a figure that the Old Testament prophets had predicted would come.

And he would be descended from David, and he would be a great king and a great deliverer of his people. Now, the prophets also indicated there would be something more mysterious about the identity of the Messiah. He would actually be God in the flesh.

There are prophets, especially Isaiah, who make this point, although this fact was lost on many of the Jewish people. Many of the Jewish people had just come to understand the Messiah to be an ordinary but great man like David, who would come and deliver the people, and they had kind of lost sight of those scriptures that suggested the Messiah would be God. Now, the disciples, when they first heard of Jesus or saw him, had concluded that he was indeed the Messiah, and so they began to follow him.

But it had not fully dawned on them that he was God in the flesh. And so we have this demonstration of his divine power, and at the end of this story we have them saying in verse 27, Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey him? Now, of course, the answer to that can only be one thing. In the Old Testament, there were many references to the fact that God commands the wind and the sea.

There's, of course, the very familiar story of Jonah, how Jonah was called by God to go to Nineveh and preach the gospel. Not the gospel, but actually a word of judgment, but he had a message from God, let's put it that way. And he didn't want to preach it, and so he got on a boat and started going the wrong direction, and it says that God sent a storm, and that storm, of course, almost sunk the ship.

And so when Jonah was thrown overboard by his shipmates, God caused the storm to stop. So we can see from that story that God is the one who commands the wind and the waves to whip up or to die down. Likewise, there are many places in the Psalms that speak of God's ability to stir up storms or to command the waves to die down.

In Psalm 46 and in Psalm 44, those two Psalms, they talk about God's power to command the wind and the waves. Likewise, Psalm 107 does, which we may have a look at a little

later here. But the point is that in the Old Testament, it was fully established that God is the one who commands the elements of nature, and they obey him because he is their creator.

And now Jesus does the same thing, and the disciples marvel and say, who can this be? Well, it's a rhetorical question. Who can it be that does this? Well, the answer, of course, from the Bible, that they didn't dare to suggest for fear that it would be suggesting too much. The biblical answer is he must be God.

Now, this story illustrates how that Jesus' true identity was not grasped immediately by his disciples. And I think it dawned on them in stages. Even much later than this, Jesus wasn't sure if they fully understood who he was, because he said to them at Caesarea Philippi in Matthew 16, who do you say I am? And when Jesus gave the right answer, he said, you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Jesus was relieved to hear that they got it right, because he wasn't sure how much of his true identity they had really grasped at that time. Well, here we see one of those stories that gave them a glimpse into who this guy was they were with. Now, it starts out they're on the Sea of Galilee, and immediately there comes up this great tempest, a great storm.

And it was a great storm. Now, I've never been on the Sea of Galilee myself, but I have been told by those who have been there that it's very common for storms to come without notice on the sea. Now, these disciples, of course, some of them had spent a lot of time on that sea.

Many of them were fishermen all their lives right there on that sea, and they were accustomed to such storms coming up. But even so, I understand that it's not always easy to tell when a storm is going to come, and they might start across the sea having no suspicion that they'd be interrupted by a storm before they got to the other side. That apparently was what happened on this occasion.

And so they set out, and this great storm comes up. And it was a doozy. It says the waves were covering the boat.

And so obviously, in a little rowboat, a fisherman's boat, this boat was in danger of sinking. Now, one of the amazing things about this is that Jesus was sleeping through the whole ordeal. In all likelihood, he was getting wet if the waves were covering the boat, and they were bailing water hurriedly.

And also, of course, there'd be a lot of noise with the disciples shouting to each other and trying to stay afloat. And yet Jesus was fast asleep. It doesn't say he was faking sleep.

Now, he could have done that, of course, just to see what they would do if he wasn't

consciously paying attention. But the Bible actually says he was asleep, and therefore he must have been very tired. This is one of those places that we see that Jesus, though he was God, when he became a man, he took on certain human handicaps.

One of the things the Bible says about God is that he does not become weary, neither does he slumber or sleep. And yet when Jesus became a man, this divine attribute of omnipotence, where he has all power and all energy and inexhaustible energy, he put that aside, and he became a human being. His physical body got tired, and he'd spent a whole night healing people, and he was eager to get some sleep, to catch up on his sleep.

And so it was that he slept in the boat. And he was so tired that even the commotion and the storm and even getting splashed with water didn't immediately wake him up. Now, the disciples, of course, were concerned that Jesus wasn't waking up, and so they awoke him.

And they said, Lord, save us, we are perishing. But he said to them, why are you fearful, O you of little faith? Then he arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. Now, notice, he rebukes the wind and the sea, but not before he rebukes the disciples.

He says, where is your faith? Why do you have such little faith? Now, I have sometimes in the past puzzled over this comment. It does not seem to me that the disciples were out of line in being concerned about sinking. After all, the boat was filling with water and appeared to be sinking.

Why would they have little faith? I mean, it's not as if believing that their boat could sink was the same thing as not believing in God. They did believe in God, but they knew that boats sometimes sink nonetheless. Why was their faith rebuked on this occasion? Well, I believe it is because of this.

They had ample reason to believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah. And yet, he had not yet come into his kingdom. He had not yet fulfilled what the Messiah was to do.

For this boat to sink right there in the middle of the Sea of Galilee at this point in time would have brought an end to Jesus' life and ministry. And therefore, it would have been impossible for the Messianic promises and prophecies to be fulfilled through him. If they truly believed he was the Messiah, they must have believed that his destiny must be fulfilled yet, and he could not sink to the bottom of the Sea of Galilee and die in this manner at this time.

That, I think, is what he expected them to realize. That although it is possible, even for godly people, to go down to the bottom of the Sea and drown, yet one was with them whom they should have known had yet unfulfilled destiny, and that they were with him.

And as long as he was in the boat, that boat could not sink so that the promises of God could be fulfilled through him.

And their fear about this meant that they weren't putting that together when they should. Now, when we're in desperate situations, a lot of times we don't think as clearly as we should, and we might be more forgiving of the disciples on this occasion than Jesus appeared to be when he rebuked them and said, Where is your faith? Or you of little faith, why are you fearful? In one of the Gospels it says, Where is your faith? We can see, therefore, that Jesus was disappointed, that they were fearful. Now, would you be fearful in that circumstance? Or let me ask you this, are you fearful in the circumstances that you find yourself in at this time? Are you in circumstances that are frightening? If so, let me ask you, is Jesus in your boat with you? Now, Jesus, as we find in this story, was able to take them safely to where he wanted them to go and to get the storm to stop.

But what if it had been that Jesus wanted them to go down and die in this water? Would they trust themselves to his will on that matter? That is part of what it means to have faith. Part of what it means to have faith or to trust God is not merely that I believe God can get me out of my troubles, but that God is with me whether he gets me out of my troubles or not, and that his will will prevail as long as I am surrendered to him. If I am in trouble, I certainly believe that God is able to take care of any trouble he wishes.

There is no problem so great that God is not greater. And he can solve every problem I have if I put my trust in him. But what if he does not? He does not have to.

He may want me to die. He may want me to go through trials. He may want this trouble to continue.

But if he is my Lord and if I love him, then I am willing to embrace his will for me, even if it means death or trials. And therefore, my faith in God is more than just my faith that he will do something good for me when I want something done. It is my faith in his character that he will always do the right thing, even if it is the thing I would not prefer.

For them to have Jesus with them should give them the ability to resign themselves to whatever he permits to happen to them. And if someone says, Lord, we're perishing. Don't let this happen.

It would appear that there's many reasons why he might feel that their faith was not what it should be on that occasion. As I said earlier, he had unfulfilled destiny, and therefore he could not go down. And it is the case that he was with them.

He could save them if he wished. Of course, he was asleep, and that bothered them. But when they woke him up, they didn't exactly show great faith now that he was awake.

Oh, everything's fine now. You're awake, Jesus. They were still terrified.

But Jesus rebuked them for their lack of faith, and then he rebuked the wind and the waves. Now, it's interesting that he spoke to the wind and the waves. There was another occasion in the Old Testament where a man commanded the weather, and that was... well, he didn't actually command the weather, but he affected the weather, and that was Elijah.

Elijah went before King Ahab and Jezebel and said, There will be no more rain until I say so. And then he went out, and for three and a half years it didn't rain. And at the end of that three and a half years, he went up and he prayed on the mountain.

And he prayed vigorously seven times that the rain would come. And finally, it did come. So, we find Elijah held out to us, for example, in the book of James, chapter 5, as an example of a man who really got the job done through prayer.

I mean, he prayed earnestly that it might not rain, and it didn't rain for three and a half years. And then he prayed again, and the rains came. There's another case of a man affecting the weather, but it's very different.

Elijah didn't command the rain to come or command the rain to stop. He had to pray and ask God to do that. He spent his time on his face praying, God, please send the rain, and then eventually God did.

Jesus, on the other hand, didn't pray that the rain would stop. He just did God's job and commanded it to stop, and it did. So, Jesus was not just like another prophet praying that God would deliver them from the storm.

He stood up and addressed the storm directly just as God would. And with the authority of God, which is why the disciples found it so astonishing. Now, it's interesting that Jesus rebuked inanimate objects, wind and waves, the sea.

Rebuking usually means that you kind of scold or, in a sense, you correct and you confront. You do that to people who can hear you and people who can think. You address conscious beings, and yet the sea is not conscious and the wind is not conscious.

Although we could not be sure that even unconscious elements might not somehow be able to hear God when he speaks. After all, Jesus is the creator, and in the day of creation we read that God said, Let there be light, and there was light. Apparently the darkness heard him and obeyed, and God said, Let dry land appear, and it did.

It does seem that God has the power to command even inanimate things, and they do his bidding. We know that God commands things that are not rational, like birds and so forth, in their courses. The Bible tells us that God directs them in their migration and so forth.

And so, God himself, of course, can address inanimate objects. They are his servants,

and Jesus as such may have been just doing that. There are some who believe that by Jesus rebuking the wind and the waves, it tells us something about this, and that is that there were demonic forces behind this particular storm.

This would not be the case with all storms, but this storm may well have been sent by the devil himself. And the reason this is suggested is because on the other side of the lake, where Jesus and his disciples were going, were two demon-possessed men who lived in the tombs, very scary characters, and they were terrorizing the whole region with their fierceness. Now, these were some of the devil's chief captives, and we know that when Jesus met them, and that's going to come up in the next story, Jesus cast the demons out of them, and they were delivered, and the devil lost two of his chief captives to Jesus here.

There are some who have suggested that as Jesus was crossing the lake, the devil could easily see that Jesus was headed for an encounter with these men, and that the devil could easily predict that Jesus would cast the demons out of them. And so, in order to prevent this from happening, the enemy sent a storm to sink the boat and try to do away with Jesus before he could encounter these demon-possessed men. Now, we can't be sure of this, but some are encouraged to this scenario by the fact that Jesus rebuked the storm as if it was animate, and we do read of Jesus rebuking demons on other occasions.

And so, there is at least the possibility to be considered that this was not an ordinary storm, but it was a storm sent by the enemy, and that Jesus' rebuke was very much a rebuke of the spiritual powers that were the cause of that storm. In any case, whether that is a correct thesis or not, I do not know. He may have simply been addressing inanimate objects, and I have no doubt that God has the power to address the inanimate and the unconscious and get a response from them.

After all, God did command the dead men to come forth. Jesus said, Lazarus, come forth. And a dead man can't hear anything, but he came forth anyway.

So, I really can't make too much of this, although I point out that some people feel, and there is some grounds for this theory, that there may have been demonic powers behind this storm. In any case, whether demonic or not, the storm was not friendly toward Jesus or his disciples. It was a challenge to them.

It was an enemy to them on that occasion, until Jesus stilled the waves. But it is interesting that Jesus rebuked the disciples before he rebuked the storm. Before rebuking the enemy, Jesus rebukes his friends.

Now, why would this be? Well, it says in 1 Peter that judgment begins at the house of God. Those who are Jesus' friends have less excuse for going the wrong way or thinking wrongly than the enemies of Christ have. Those who are enemies of Christ are in darkness.

And to rebuke the enemy before he has rebuked the sin in his own disciples would be to act as if the enemy had as much responsibility as those who know him have. But actually, those who know Jesus have the greater responsibility to think properly and to act properly. And so they come under the first line of correction before the storm itself is rebuked.

Now, when Jesus had done this, we read, the men marveled, saying, Who can this be that even the winds and the waves or the sea obey him? And of course, the answer to that they did not even dare to suggest at that point in their relationship because the only answer that made sense would be God. In fact, let me read to you a passage from Psalm 107. See if this sounds familiar.

It begins at Psalm 107, verse 23. The psalmist wrote, Those who go down to the sea in ships, who do business on great waters, they see the works of the Lord and his wonders in the deep. For he commands and raises up the stormy wind, which lifts up the waves of the sea.

They mount up to the heavens. They go down again into the depths. Their soul, meaning the sailor's soul, melts because of the trouble.

They reel to and fro and stagger like drunken men and are at their wits' end. Then they cry out to the Lord in their trouble, and he brings them out of their distresses. He calms the storm so that its waves are still.

Then they are glad because of the quiet, so he guides them to their desired haven. Notice that. Doesn't that just sound like the same story we just read? But this was written a thousand years before the time of Christ.

It's spoken generically. People go to sea. God stirs up a storm.

They get terrified. They're at their wits' end. So they cry out to God, and God calms the sea.

And then they give him thanks for it, and they're relieved. Now, this psalm, of course, is so close to this story that it's hard to imagine that this experience of the disciples on the sea was not merely an illustration of that very psalm. And yet, who is it in the psalm who calms the sea? It's the Lord.

It's Jehovah calms the sea. And the disciples who go through this very experience, they call on the Lord in their distress, and he calms the sea, just like the psalmist said. But they called on Jesus.

In the psalm, they call out on God, Jehovah God. And Jesus did just the same thing as Jehovah does. In fact, he is Jehovah.

And that's what they were beginning to realize. Who is this man? Who can this be? In Mark, I think it says, what manner of man is this? Or what kind of person is this that we are with? In fact, in Mark's gospel, in chapter 4 of Mark, in verse 41, after Jesus stilled the storm, it says, And they feared exceedingly, and said to one another, Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey him? Notice, they feared exceedingly. After the danger was over, they feared exceedingly.

They were afraid when the storm was there, but they were more afraid when the storm was calmed. Why? Because it gave them goosebumps to think, Whoa, this guy that we're traveling with is more than meets the eye. Who is he? And it kind of, I think, kind of gave them the creeps, in a way.

I mean, to realize that this person who's your friend and companion, there's more to him than meets the eye. And he may even be God. Imagine that realization dawning on you.

Well, I hope that realization does dawn on you as we study the life of Christ, and we'll continue that in our next time as we go on through the Gospel of Matthew together.