

# Bread and Water

Rev. David W. Edwards, MA

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Text: Matt 14:13-36

This is a huge section of Scripture. Most preachers would make it three sermons. That's fine, if you want to do that, because there are essentially three stories embedded here. But there are two particular elements to the stories that tie them together. Maybe three, we'll see. And it's not the word "immediately" stuck in the middle.

Here is one place where Matthew seems to indicate that these two events took place in succession. Jesus fed the multitude and then *immediately* after sent the disciples across the lake into the storm. They barely had time to clean up the left-overs before they were loaded into the boat and sent on ahead. And that's sometimes the way we read this. The problem with our reading is that we compress time. The first event took all day; the next took all night. But it was just one day. We might prefer the words "and then." Jesus fed the multitude and then sent the disciples across the lake. That might give us a little time to breathe and consider what's actually happening here.

My second concern with splitting this into three parts is that I don't really believe the emphasis should be on either miracle. Preachers often do that, preaching about how Jesus multiplied the bread and fed the crowd; preaching a different sermon on Jesus sending the disciples into the storm and then walking to them on the water. Some will focus on Peter's reaction in the latter situation. I heard an old black preacher give a sermon on Peter walking on the water. He said, "He didn't walk far. He didn't walk long. But he walked." The focus is often on Peter's faith and how that can inform our own faith. I even heard a preacher talk about this as if it were some sort of motivational scripture, telling the congregation that they needed to "get out of the boat." If they wanted to do new things, experience God's grace in new ways, they needed to "get out of the boat." Well, okay, I guess. But I think they're missing the point. I think there's something to this story – because I think it's really just one story - that we've missed.

Let's refresh our memory just a bit: Why did Matthew write his gospel? Why did Matthew include the various parables and miracles that he did? Often, when we talk about context, we forget to ask "why". The answer to the "why" is vital to understanding Matthew in general and in the specifics. So, why did Matthew write his gospel?

He wrote it, as we discovered at the very beginning, to show that Jesus was the promised Messiah, that Jesus fulfilled the messianic prophecies, that Jesus had come to introduce and inaugurate the kingdom of God, and that Jesus is, as the prophets said, Immanuel, God with us. That's not just a pretty name. Stop and ponder it for just a moment: God, "the Being outside the

world, who had made it and was infinitely different from anything else”;<sup>1</sup> the God of the *Shema*,<sup>2</sup> who is One, infinite, invisible, omnipotent, and defined by holy love – that God stepped into his Creation and became one with us, walked our dusty roads, ate our crusty bread, laughed and wept with us. The God of the universe came to us as a man to be broken on a Roman cross, buried in a borrowed grave, and risen to give us eternal life. And Matthew shows us the utter humanity of Immanuel.

In this story, Matthew shows us both the humanity and the deity of Jesus. First, the humanity.

This story begins with the execution of John the Baptist. *When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.* Why? When we looked at chapter eleven, we saw that Jesus held his cousin in high esteem, calling him the greatest of all prophets. He was not a *reed swayed by the wind*. By the way, the reed was used as a symbol of royalty. And one of the problems with politicians is that they watch the public opinion polls and are swayed by the winds of popular opinion. They will say what they need to say to obtain power and to stay in power. They will try to appease all the “right” people with bribes and favors. They shake the hands and bow the knees to whomever they must to stay in office. What Jesus was saying is that John was no politician. He wasn’t like Antipas or Pilate. He didn’t care what people thought of him and he didn’t scrape and bow to obtain favors. He was a prophet of God, who stood tall and spoke the truth. He didn’t whisper and he didn’t stutter. He spoke and no one within earshot could mistake his words. Which is why he was thrown in jail and then executed.

Jesus held John in high esteem, yes, but they were cousins. They grew up together, just six months apart in age, they probably played together as children and likely attended yeshiva (school) together. There is familial love between the two of them. So John’s death brought Jesus grief. He needed time alone to grieve and to process the news. He withdrew to a lonely place to mourn his cousin.

But the crowds wouldn’t relent. They just kept coming. They found out where Jesus had gone and *the crowds followed him on foot from the towns*. So that Jesus didn’t get his time alone, his solitary place. When his boat landed, he was immediately mobbed by the sick begging to be healed. And so Jesus did what he had to do, ignoring his own pain to bring relief to others. All day long he healed, until as evening approached, the disciples asked him to send the crowd away so they could go home and eat. And here we have the first miracle.

Look first at Exodus 16. There the Israelites have managed to escape Egypt. They have just crossed the Red Sea. They dance and sing songs of deliverance, and then realize they are stuck out there in the desert with no water and no food. And they start griping and whining. “Why did we ever listen to Moses? Why did we follow him out here into the desert? There’s no food and we’re going to starve to death. We’d have been better off to stay in Egypt and die there. At least *there we*

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<sup>1</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000, © 1952, C. S. Lewis Pte. Ltd. renewed © 1980), p 51

<sup>2</sup>Deuteronomy 6:4ff

*sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted* (Ex 16:3). Never mind that it was carp and spoiled onions. It was better than starvation. So what does God do for starving people?

*That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared ... Moses said to them, "It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat" (Ex 16:13-15).* And Jesus takes two fish and five biscuits and feeds the hungry crowd, not like Moses, but like God handing out bread to the starving. Jesus brought them manna from heaven. Matthew is trying to tell you that Jesus is the same God who provided manna in the desert. There's another parallel we often miss – what about those twelve baskets of leftovers? How many tribes were there in the wilderness? Twelve. Matthew is trying, I think, to tell you that not only is Jesus the same God who provides manna in the wilderness, he's the God of plenty. He's a generous God who gives *more than all we can ask or imagine* (Eph 3:20). He's a loving God who gives *good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over* (Lk 6:38). God provided for the whole nation; Jesus provides for the whole crowd.

*Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side ...* Why? Has he yet had a moment to grieve for John? Has he yet found that quiet place to be alone in prayer? He sent the disciples ahead of him so that he could go *up on a mountainside by himself to pray*. Jesus needed some down time. With my daughter's generation, I started hearing something I'd never heard before, "me time." I need some me time. I never heard that before. My mom would go into the bathroom and lock the door and read Guidepost magazines and do crossword puzzles. We knew not to disturb her, but I never heard it called "me time." But just like us today, Jesus needed time alone to pray, to process, to grieve, to recuperate, and to find healing for a broken heart. Just like you. Just like you.

But a storm was brewing for the disciples. We learned some while back how volatile the Galilee is, how suddenly storms can flash over the lake, and how sailors hesitate to go too far out lest they get caught in one of these violent maelstroms. Jesus had been alone, praying, grieving all night. *Shortly before dawn*, Matthew says, Jesus took a shortcut. Instead of walking around the lake, he decided to walk across it.

I've been thinking about these stories for a few days. You know how to read and they are very familiar to you, so there's really no need for me to simply tell you the story again. The disciples thought they saw a ghost until Jesus called out to them. Peter, wanting to be sure of the identity of the stranger on the water, asked for a command. When he got it he walked on the water. Got distracted by the wind and started to sink. Cried out for rescue and Jesus rescued him. When they got back into the boat the storm died down and they finished crossing the lake. That's the story you know. But, you don't know the story.

What did Jesus say to the disciples in the storm? The NIV translates it, "*Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.*" Almost all of the translations render Jesus' words about the same. But that's not really what he said. I did find a couple translations that get closer. When I was taking Greek in college, we translated the gospel of John. You will probably be familiar with the I AM statements in John – I AM the Good Shepherd, I AM the Way; I AM the Door, etc. There are eight of them altogether. By the way, two of those statements made the Pharisees so angry they tried to stone

Jesus. In Greek the statement is ἐγώ εἰμι, *ego eimi*, *I AM*, or *I AM he*. The Disciples Literal New Testament renders Jesus' words, "*Take-courage, I am the One.*" The Amplified New Testament renders it, "*Take courage! I AM!*" with a cross-reference to Exodus 3:14 where God told Moses His name. This is actually another I AM statement, given to the disciples trembling in terror. Have courage, I AM. Cheer up, I AM is coming to you. Immanuel, God comes walking on the water.

Jesus not only used God's name to refer to himself in his teaching in the I AM statements in John, but here in the storm, in an emergency, he let the disciples know that he was the Creator and Master of the winds and waves. They had nothing to fear for the Lord of the Universe was on the scene. You see, it's not just about keeping our eyes on Jesus in the midst of the storm. It's not even about getting out of the boat. It's about recognizing who is in control. The very Son of God came walking on the waves. Jesus was revealing himself to them. In their distress, they didn't need a rabbi. They didn't need a great moral teacher. They didn't need an enlightened man. They didn't need a prophet. They were in a situation where they needed God himself to show up.

Now, add this little kicker. Jesus appears here to address Peter. Mark and John recount the same story but leave Peter out. In Mark 6 and John 6, Jesus addresses all of them: "*You of small faith, why did you doubt?*" That's one word, by the way: little-faiths, faithless. It might come across as an accusation, and especially when the question is added: "Why did you doubt?"

Hadn't Jesus just that very day fed the multitude? Hadn't they just seen with their own eyes a miracle of manna? Hadn't they just gathered up twelve baskets full of leftovers? Had they missed the whole thing? Not a week ago. Not ten years ago. Not somewhere back in their history. Yesterday! It had just happened! So why the doubt? Did they still not believe. He had revealed himself to them, announced his presence with the name of God, walked on water as God had made a path through the water. Both of these events, by the way, harken back to the Exodus, that singular event that set Israel apart as a nation.

No, I cannot condemn the disciples for missing it. Too often we are blind to what God is doing. Too often we miss it because we're busy looking for something else, busy looking elsewhere, distracted by the noise of the world, perhaps frightened in our own tempestuous ocean. We're busy looking around at the storm and God himself comes walking on the water. We see the miracles but misunderstand, or don't realize what it is we're seeing. Why did they doubt? No, why do we doubt? Where was their faith? No, where is our faith? We are often trapped in the smallness of our faith, believing with our minds but not understanding with our hearts. All the while, Jesus sends manna from heaven and parts the sea for us. Pray that God will open our eyes to see not just what he can do, but what he is doing. "Open my eyes, Lord ..."