

June 13 Lesson 2 (NIV)

DELIVERED FROM FEAR

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 107:23–32

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Matthew 8:23–27; Mark 4:35–41; Luke 8:22–25

MATTHEW 8:23–27

²³ Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. ²⁴ Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. ²⁵ The disciples went and woke him, saying, “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!”

²⁶ He replied, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.

²⁷ The men were amazed and asked, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!”

KEY VERSE

He replied, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. —Matthew 8:26

CONFIDENT HOPE

Unit 1: Jesus Teaches About Faith

LESSONS 1–5

LESSON OUTLINE

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HOW TO SAY IT

agoraphobia *uh-gore-uh-foe-be-uh*.

ailurophobia *eye-lur-uh-foe-be-uh*.

claustrophobia *klaw-struh-foe-be-uh*.

cynophobia *sigh-nuh-foe-be-uh*.

Gadarenes *Gad-uh-reens*.

Galilee *Gal-uh-lee*.

Gennesaret *Geh-ness-uh-ret* (G as in get).

Mediterranean *Med-uh-tuh-ray-nee-un*.

Pax Romana (*Latin*) *Pahks Ro-mah-nah*.

Introduction

A. What Are You Afraid Of?

Context can cause the question above to be answered in different ways. It all depends on when, where, why, how, and by whom it is asked.

As an honest inquiry into what causes fear, we know that people experience fears of various kinds. Some common fears are fears of open spaces (agoraphobia) and closed spaces (claustrophobia). Much rarer is a fear of dogs (cynophobia) and of cats (ailurophobia). Between these two is a list that is virtually endless. And fears are very individualized. Sometimes they seem to make little sense—such as fear of mice on the part of a strong, smart person. Fears may be connected with traumas that have left an indelible mark on a person.

There is another way we can use the title question: it can be meant rhetorically—as a statement rather than an inquiry. The sense is something like, “You know that you have no reason

to be afraid.” We all wish that we could say this to ourselves and our fears would disappear. Unfortunately, fear tends to persist even when we try to reason ourselves out of it.

Fear, as a God-given self-defense mechanism, can trigger a reaction of *fight, flight, or freeze*. The problem is that the particular reaction that results may be irrationally inappropriate or even harmful in a given context. At lower levels, chronic fear can ruin appetite, raise blood pressure, and cause ulcers. Fear itself can kill.

Our text today is about a situation that provoked fear: the fear of death in a deadly situation. How Jesus spoke and acted in the face of that fear can teach us much about the Lord we serve.

B. Lesson Context: Sea of Galilee

Jesus’ ministry in Matthew’s Gospel takes place mostly in Galilee, the northern portion of ancient Israel. The region was named for the body of water at its center, known in the New Testament as the Sea of Galilee or the Sea of Tiberias (John 6:1). It is about 41,000 acres in size, about 12 miles north to south and 7.5 miles east to west. Its size makes it more of a “lake” than a “sea”; by contrast, Lake Erie is about 150 times as large as the Sea of Galilee. Indeed, the latter is referred to as “the Lake of Gennesaret” in Luke 5:1. Nestled between steep hills on the east and west, one could stand on the hills and see to the other side. The distance would require much effort to row from one side to the other.

The Sea of Galilee was a center of fishing during the time of Jesus. Some of his 12 disciples had been fishermen there (Matthew 4:18–22). These men had much experience with this lake and its dangers. In addition to fishing, the inhabitants of the area used the lake as a medium of transportation from one village to another. Rowing across the sea was faster than the alternative of walking around on shore. We can imagine that on a typical day the sea was dotted with small boats—some fishing, some carrying travelers. On most days, those boats carried their passengers safely.

C. Lesson Context: Miracles

Following the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7 (see Lesson Context of lesson 1), which sets forth Jesus’ authority in teaching, chapters 8–9 focuses largely on Jesus’ miracles. These demonstrate his authority in actions as they consistently pointed to a power that could belong to God alone. With a word, Jesus was able to heal the sick (Matthew 8:5–13), cleanse leprosy (Luke 17:12–19; see lesson 5), cast out evil spirits (Mark 7:24–30), and command the forces of nature (Mark 11:12–14, 19–21). His miracles established that Jesus was either the most wonderful prophet ever sent by God or that he was something more than a prophet.

Jesus did not use his divine power for his own benefit (compare Matthew 4:1–11; 26:53). His miracles were for the sake of others, especially those whose situation seemed hopeless. As such, the miracles were signs that God’s kingdom—his promised reign over all creation that restores his righteous purpose—was breaking into the world. God’s reign would vanquish the sin-threat and its consequences. God’s people would then live in his presence, safe and secure, for eternity.

Jesus’ miracles demonstrated that promised future. His enemies attributed his ability to satanic powers (Matthew 12:24) and mocked him (27:42). Still, Jesus made salvation possible by giving of his life. His resulting resurrection was his greatest act of power. But as we begin today’s

text, that is yet a year or so in the future. (The events of today's text are also recorded in Mark 4:35–41 and Luke 8:22–25.)

I. The Perilous Situation

(MATTHEW 8:23–24)

A. Following Jesus (v. 23)

23a. Then he got into the boat

This phrase invites the reader to connect this story to the ones just before it (Matthew 8:18–22). There, Jesus encountered two men as he was about to cross the lake in a *boat*. Both wanted to follow Jesus, so Jesus pointed out the cost of doing so. God's kingdom brings his promised blessings to his people, but it costs those people everything they have (Matthew 13:44–46). It's unclear from that text if either man ended up following Jesus (compare Luke 9:57–62).

23b. and his disciples followed him.

Matthew does not specify Jesus' intended destination at this point (contrast Mark 4:35; Luke 8:22). In this Gospel, we have to wait until Matthew 8:28 to discover that he and his *disciples* were headed to "the region of the Gadarenes," on the other side of the lake.

We should note that any follower of Jesus may be referred to in the Gospels as a disciple (example: Matthew 27:57). The term refers to a learner who accepts and assists in spreading the teaching of another. But since the boat obviously had some size limitations, the disciples mentioned were most likely only the 12 original ones (see Matthew 10:1–4). As they boarded the boat, they did so in obedience, following their teacher. In Matthew's Gospel, this band of disciples is just beginning to emerge as an identifiable unit.

Jesus did not choose these 12 because they were exemplary in every way, however. All four Gospels portray them largely as failing to understand Jesus' mission (examples: Matthew 16:13–27; Mark 10:35–45; Luke 18:15–17; John 4:25–38). They were often fearful and spiritually deaf (examples: Matthew 14:27; Mark 4:40; Luke 9:45). As he went to his death, he predicted that they would all fall away, even as he looked forward to welcoming them back after his resurrection (Matthew 26:31–32; see 28:16–20). They continued to misunderstand his mission at least up until the time of his ascension (Acts 1:6).

B. In a Deadly Storm (v. 24)

24a. Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat.

As sometimes happened on this lake, a storm *came up* that took the experienced boatmen by surprise. Storms in Galilee travel west to east from the Mediterranean Sea. The area to the immediate west of the lake consists of steep, high hills separated by narrow valleys. That means that storms can appear from the west with little warning for those on the lake since their view of approaching weather is blocked by the hills.

The remains of a first-century fishing boat was discovered along the shore in 1986. Its size (about 27 feet in length and 8 feet in width) indicates that *waves* of just a couple of feet could overwhelm such a vessel, especially when accompanied by rain. In deep water far from shore, these men faced death if their boat did not stay afloat.

24b. But Jesus was sleeping.

Mark's account specifies that Jesus was "in the stern, *sleeping* on a cushion" (Mark 4:38). This refers to the back part of the vessel.

Somehow *Jesus was sleeping* through the rain, wind, waves, and noise. Was he so exhausted he could sleep through anything? Was his stamina so drained that he could not respond? The text does not say. Some students take the position that answering yes to either question would contradict what we and the disciples later learn about Jesus in Matthew 26:36–45 and John 13:3. Others think that a yes answer is possible based on Matthew 4:2; 27:32; and John 4:6.

Either way, the fact of Jesus' sleeping during a storm should not be bypassed too quickly. The psalmist presents sleep as the answer of a confident believer to the dangers of this world (see Psalms 3:5; 4:8). Jesus shows no fear because he truly has no reason to fear. We can safely assume that a deadly storm would awaken most, if not all, of us. But Jesus experienced a freedom from fear that is unlike any in our ordinary experience. This surely points to Jesus' confidence in his identity. He knew his mission was leading him to the cross (John 12:23–36; 19:30); he would not die on the sea.

II. The Act of Deliverance

(MATTHEW 8:25–27)

A. Cry of the Helpless (v. 25)

25a. The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord,

Unlike Jesus, *the disciples* registered their peril. Their skills on the sea were not enough to protect them from this grave danger. They were all going to die! For Jesus to be sleeping through the storm was incomprehensible to them. They did not yet understand Jesus' identity.

The disciples needed someone more powerful than themselves. And to their credit, they at least knew who that someone was. Other boats were also out on the water (Mark 4:36), but the disciples were focused on their own peril as they addressed Jesus as *Lord*. This term ascribed authority to him, but exactly what kind of authority they meant isn't entirely clear.

While obviously God is often called Lord, the Greek word translated in this way can just mean master or sir (examples: Matthew 6:24; 27:63). It is possible that the disciples acknowledged Jesus as their teacher, but not as equal to God at this time. Perhaps that idea is like a seed in their minds, about to germinate.

Certainly the disciples had much still to learn about who Jesus is. Even when Peter later declared Jesus to be "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16), the disciple immediately showed that what he had just confessed he did not yet understand (see 16:21–27). A clearer understanding of what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah would not come to the disciples until after he rose to life from the grave (example: Luke 24:26–34). Still, the disciples already knew enough to call him Lord—one superior to them in authority in some way.

25b. "save us! We're going to drown!"

For many believers, the concept of being saved refers primarily (if not exclusively) to God's gift of salvation from sin and death (example: Ephesians 2:4–8). In Jesus' day, however, the Greek word translated *save* and its variants were used for all kinds of rescuing. It was often used by

political and military leaders who took credit for benefits they brought to the people they led. This was especially true of the emperors, who “saved” the people in their empire through the Pax Romana (the “Roman Peace”).

The Greek word behind the translation could also be used of any act that brought benefit to those in need or protection for those in danger (example: Luke 23:39). Clearly the disciples were asking Jesus to save them from drowning in the stormy sea, not requesting eternal salvation.

We too cry out to Jesus in this way at times. We also fear perishing physically because of events—some of our own making—in this sin-sick world. When we look at the disciples in this account, in many ways we are looking in a mirror.

B. An Authoritative Word (v. 26)

26a. He replied, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?”

The disciples had enough reason to trust Jesus in this terrible storm. The mighty power he had already demonstrated was more than adequate evidence (examples: Matthew 4:23–25; 8:1–13).

Their fear stemmed from their *little faith*. The word being translated occurs five times in the Gospels (here and Matthew 6:30 [see lesson 1]; 14:31; 16:8; and Luke 12:28). Its use indicates a mild rebuke. If they had much faith, they could trust that Jesus would act for them, even if he did not act immediately. By this point in their experience with Jesus, the disciples should have been able to recognize that such dangers pose no real threat, given the evidence of miracles. This fact should have resulted in showing more courage when facing situations that normally result in fear and anxiety. The five uses of “little faith” reveal sadly that this would not be the last time Jesus would chastise them in this regard.

Jesus’ words challenged the disciples to let their faith grow to fit the magnitude of their Lord’s power and his gracious goodwill to use it on their behalf. Elsewhere, Jesus taught that “faith as small as a mustard seed” could move a mountain (Matthew 17:20). Little faith has potential, but in this case fear weakened it.

26b. Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.

Jesus’ rebuke of *the winds and the waves* is something of a counterpart to his rebuke of the disciples’ little faith. Some believe that the Lord will meet their needs only if they have enough faith to satisfy him. But Jesus saves the small of faith even as he urges them on to greater faith. We should realize, however, that having little faith is perilously close to having no faith (compare Matthew 17:14–20). And, paradoxically, belief and unbelief can exist side by side (Mark 9:24).

For a moment, the act of saving in the lesson text foreshadows saving for eternity. The angel announced to Joseph before Jesus’ birth, “He will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Jesus’ mighty deeds were visible signs of the greater work he would do to cleanse the guilty and restore them as God’s eternal people (Titus 2:11–14).

Jesus’ followers went on to face many perilous situations that could easily—and often did—take their lives. They ultimately learned to rely on Jesus to protect them, even to restore life by resurrection (2 Corinthians 4:17). He will always use his almighty, divine power for the long-term benefit of those who love him. That is true even when (or especially when) the situation seems

hopeless and he seems unresponsive to our need (compare Job 30:20; Psalm 22:2; Revelation 6:10).

C. A Response of Amazement (v. 27)

27a. The men were amazed

As God's words put the waters of the seas in their place (Genesis 1:9–10), so Jesus' words did with the storm. The New Testament makes clear that Jesus is the Creator. That the Creator is able to command his own creation in a miraculous way should not surprise us (see John 11:1–4; Colossians 1:16). But witnessing Jesus' power at work makes the disciples awestruck. This is the frequent reaction when people see Jesus' mighty power at work in the form of miracles and in word (examples: Matthew 9:33; 15:31; 21:20; 22:22; 27:14). Mark emphasizes only the great fear of the disciples (Mark 4:41).

27b. and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!"

The disciples recognized that what Jesus did was not the work of an ordinary *man*. The disciples were experiencing what some call "cognitive dissonance" today. What they saw—Jesus commanding *the winds and the waves* and both obeying him—did not match their normal, day to day experience that storms do not obey human commands.

Psalm 107:23–32 describes a scene very much like the one the disciples had just experienced. Men went out to sea, witnessing the wonders of the waters God created. A storm arose, lifting huge waves, provoking terror in the sailors. They cried out to the Lord, the God of Israel, for protection. God stilled the storm, eliciting joy and thanksgiving from those whose lives had been spared. There was no doubt who had saved them (compare Jonah 2:1–9).

Jesus had just done what the psalmist described God as doing. Only the one who created the wind and the waves in the first place can command them. In Jesus, God had become a man. Because of his mighty power that he graciously exercised on humanity's behalf, they had nothing to fear.

Conclusion

A. Faith Silences Fear

What do you fear? Typically, the things that make us most afraid are those that threaten us in some way because we can't control them. Instead of praying first, we first try our best to gain control. But in the end we recognize that our control is very limited. Disease stalks even those who eat right and exercise. Financial crises strike even the prudent. Accidents happen to the careful. Our protective reach cannot constantly extend as far as those we love.

There is a far superior alternative to trying to maintain control over our circumstances first and, when that fails, turning to the Lord. The alternative is to reverse those priorities. Because Jesus gave his life for us, we can surely trust him to do for us what he did for 12 men of little faith in a small boat—and more.

The created world is filled with mortal dangers. Our reaction should be that of the psalmist:

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence (Psalm 91:1–3).

B. Prayer

Lord God, we confess that we are a fearful people. Our faith is small. Help us grow in faith as we freely confess our mixture of belief and unbelief as did the man in Mark 9:24 as we entrust ourselves to you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Allow the Lord to grow your faith and silence your fears.