

June 27 Lesson 4 (NIV)

RESCUED FROM DOUBT

DEVOTIONAL READING: Isaiah 38:16–20

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Matthew 14:22–33

MATTHEW 14:22–33

²² Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. ²³ After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, ²⁴ and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

²⁵ Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. ²⁶ When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.

²⁷ But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

²⁸ “Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

²⁹ “Come,” he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

³¹ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

³² And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. ³³ Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

KEY VERSE

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” —Matthew 14:31

CONFIDENT HOPE

Unit 1: Jesus Teaches About Faith

LESSONS 1–5

LESSON OUTLINE

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HOW TO SAY IT

Galilee*Gal-uh-lee.*

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

Rainier*Ruh-nir.*

Introduction

A. The Challenge of Consistency

If you enjoy playing a sport, you probably have had a few moments of sports greatness. You sank a long-distance putt, you made a great catch, or you hit a difficult shot. Even if you are not an athletic person, perhaps you can recall some other notable achievement. Things like finishing a crossword puzzle in record time or completing a particularly detailed and time-intensive project flawlessly. In moments like that, someone might say, “That was as good as a professional would do.” And we would agree.

At least we would agree for a moment. But if we think about it, we realize that what we manage to do every now and then does not put us on the same level as a professional. A professional performs consistently with excellence. Did you *happen* to perform like a professional? Yes. Can you do it with a professional’s consistency? No way!

Our text features a Bible character who reminds us of the challenge of consistency. The text will show us that the power of Jesus, not the consistency of our faith or the frequency of our doubt, is the basis for our security as God's people.

B. Lesson Context

Matthew, Mark, and John place the account of today's text (absent from Luke) after the account of the feeding of the 5,000. (Mark 6:45–52 and John 6:16–21 are the parallel accounts of today's text.) That event had astonished and excited the large crowd of followers, not just because it was a great miracle but because it reminded them of God's miraculous provision of food in the wilderness during the exodus from Egypt in Moses' time (Exodus 16). Knowing that the prophets promised a coming deliverance like the exodus (Isaiah 40:1–5), the crowd's wonder and excitement were on the rise.

Jesus took steps to quiet this enthusiasm. Yes, he was indeed the true king promised by God, the one who would bring freedom to God's people as God did in the exodus. But how he became king, how he freed people, was yet to come in his death and resurrection. Only then would any of his followers, be they members of the 12 or the crowds, be able to understand and respond to him with greater comprehension of the truth.

Jesus' power was very much on display in that feeding, but so was the disciples' limitation in their thinking (Matthew 14:15–17)—even though it was by then the third year of Jesus' public ministry. The 12 disciples were witnesses to these events, which should have inspired confidence in Jesus. Their challenge was to respond to disappointment, opposition, and danger with faith in Jesus, knowing that his power could overcome every difficulty. But each new threat presented a new occasion to question whether Jesus was worthy of their trust.

Our lesson is set on the Sea of Galilee (see Lesson Context of lesson 2, p. 354). In 1986, the remains of a boat from the time of Jesus were discovered buried in the mud near the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Excavated and now on display, the boat is probably typical for the time. It measures 27 feet in length and 7.5 feet at its widest point. It could have been propelled with oars, a sail, or both.

Such boats were quite safe when the weather was fine. But storms can arise quickly on this lake. Because its western coastline features steep hills, a storm blowing in from that direction, from the Mediterranean Sea, might be seen by boaters only when it is nearly upon them. A small boat hit by high winds is in a perilous condition, even on such a small lake.

I. Jesus Alone **(MATTHEW 14:22–24)**

A. The Journey Begins (v. 22)

22. Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd.

There is no record here of Jesus' providing *the disciples* with information about how he would catch up to them later after he traveled alone. Though it's possible that Jesus would walk around

the lake, more likely the disciples expected him to catch a ride in a different *boat*. He also *dismissed the crowd* in order to be alone.

B. The Lord in Prayer (v. 23)

23a. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.

Though Jesus had previously taught about prayer (Matthew 6:5–15), this is the first instance in which we see Jesus at prayer in Matthew’s Gospel. Later Jesus prayed repeatedly the night before his death (26:36–44). Each of the other Gospels also bear witness to Jesus’ prayer life (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; John 17; etc.).

It is a remarkable part of this story that Jesus, who embodies and exercises the almighty power of God, nevertheless prays earnestly and at length to God the Father. This is critical to our understanding of Jesus. He was the divine Son of God, to whom all authority had been given (Matthew 28:18). He does mighty deeds that demonstrate a power that can belong only to God (9:6–7). Yet Jesus entered the world in submission to the Father. The Father’s will must prevail (26:39, 42).

Jesus is the perfect model for humanity’s desired submission to and reliance on God. If Jesus, the almighty Son of God, willingly submitted to God the Father, then how much more should we, lacking in Jesus’ power and authority, do the same!

23b. Later that night, he was there alone,

The fact that Jesus was *alone* indicates that he was successful in persuading everyone to depart—most by foot homeward, the 12 by boat. *Night* came as Jesus was left by himself. Any trouble on the boat would be compounded by the darkness now settling over the Sea of Galilee.

C. The Wind Rises (v. 24)

24. and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

The boat was far from land, near the middle of the lake (compare Mark 6:47). The disciples’ progress was hindered by *wind* that pushed against them, making their sails useless. As the wind picked up, *the waves* grew higher, threatening to capsize the boat. The vessel may have been taking on water faster than the disciples could bail it out.

The disciples had been in similar danger before, also on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 8:23–27; see lesson 2). But then Jesus was with them in the ship. Now they were alone, or at least they thought so.

II. Jesus on the Water (MATTHEW 14:25–31)

A. A Miraculous Appearance (vv. 25–27)

25. Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake.

Shortly before dawn was approximately 3 a.m. to 6 a.m., given how the Roman Empire divided the night into various watches. As this time arrived, the disciples had struggled for hours against the high waves. They were exhausted and probably uncertain of their position *on the lake* after so long in the dark. While they may have hoped for some act of deliverance, we can speculate that at this point their hopes were fading, if not gone altogether.

In this desperate situation, they saw *Jesus* doing the seemingly impossible: *walking on the water*. In the exodus, God had parted the waters of the Red Sea to allow his people to walk on dry land to escape their enemies (Exodus 14:21–22). But here is an action without compare. At the point of the disciples' greatest exhaustion and hopelessness, the Lord came to reassure and rescue. How hard it must have been for them to understand what they were seeing, to believe their own eyes!

26. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

Added to the disciples' exhaustion and fear was the sight of what they believed to be a disembodied spirit. Surely a flesh-and-blood human could not be walking on water, never mind high waves in a storm in the middle of the night! Such a thing had never been done before, so there was no reason to interpret this sight as a physical, natural person. First a storm, now an apparition (compare Luke 24:36–37)! Little wonder that they cried out for fear. They felt assaulted from both the physical and spiritual realms.

27. But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

Jesus did not delay in revealing to the disciples the wholly unexpected truth: they were seeing not a disembodied spirit but their Lord. Therefore they could *take courage* in the midst of the storm. There was no more reason to be fearful of the storm that continued and certainly no reason to fear the one who walked on the water to join them.

The two commands *take courage* and *don't be afraid* are two sides of the same coin: the first is a positive command of how to respond, the other is a negative command of how *not* to respond. God was doing extraordinary, unprecedented things—things that caused even the most faithful to fear. But those extraordinary things were intended as blessings, not threats.

After his resurrection, *Jesus* told the women at the tomb "do not be afraid" (Matthew 28:10). There as here, *Jesus'* followers didn't understand how he could be present bodily with them. Yet *Jesus'* promise to all his followers is that he will be with them always, to the end of this age (28:20), fulfilling the ancient promise of "God with us" (1:23). The disciples might have felt that they were alone, but the Christ who would give his life for them would also remain with them in every circumstance, even when they could not recognize him.

Northwest have a saying when Mount Rainier isn't visible: "Even on cloudy days, live like the mountain is out."

Sometimes it's hard to recognize the Lord's presence. Storm clouds obscure his hand of grace. You may be facing a storm right now, but the mountain of God's love is still there. Will you by faith live like the mountain is out?

—D. F.

B. A Disciple's Faith (vv. 28–31)

28. "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

The story now shifts to one disciple's reaction to Jesus' self-revelation. *Peter*, with what will come to be characteristic boldness (examples: Matthew 16:16, 22; 17:4; 26:33, 35), spoke up. *If it's you* does not express doubt. We might think of it as meaning "*because it is you.*"

We might wonder why Peter asked for what he does. This bold request was not about thrill-seeking. Rather, Peter wanted to share what his master was doing. Already Jesus had sent the disciples out to preach, with authority to heal and cast out demons (Matthew 10:1). They were sharing in his ministry, and they desired to reign with him (20:20–22). So Peter sought to walk with Jesus *on the water* by Jesus' power, following him as a disciple would.

The word translated *tell* has the force of a command here and as translated elsewhere in various ways (Matthew 8:18; 14:9, 19; etc.). As used here, Peter invited Jesus to command him (Peter) to come. Peter's request was the product of an ambition, but it was a sacred ambition: to stand with his Lord in the Lord's work.

29. "Come," he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus.

Jesus granted Peter's request. And just as had been the case before, when Jesus commanded his followers to do something, he also granted them the power to carry it out. So *Peter* stepped *out of the boat* and indeed *walked on the water* toward Jesus. Peter started faithfully—so far, so good.

30. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

The same strong *wind* that had buffeted the boat all night continued. As Peter made his way on the water, his situation seemed even more perilous than it was in the boat. The fear he felt before the Lord's appearance rose again. As it did, he could no longer walk on the water.

Peter's doubt in the midst of the storm reveals that his confidence in Jesus could be shaken (see Matthew 26:69–75). Even when the disciples saw Jesus after his resurrection, doubt infected some of them (28:17). Doubt is a powerful, pervasive disposition, especially when faith is challenged in times of trouble (compare James 1:6).

Some would call what Peter was experiencing a failure of faith (see Matthew 14:31, below). But it was not a failure of faith to call out to Jesus to *save* him. Just as the disciples had called out "save us" when they had been in a storm before (Matthew 8:25; see lesson 2), Peter did so again. This desperate cry, stripped of all self-reliance and pride, can be the essence of faith in Jesus, especially when that faith is troubled by doubt (see Mark 9:24).

To experience doubt or fear is not to have lost faith. When we call out to the Lord for help, we act in faith, confessing our weakness and relying on the Lord's strength. Jesus pronounced blessing on those who were poor in spirit, meek, mourning, and hungry for righteousness—on those who have great need and who recognize their need (Matthew 5:3–6). When we experience fear and doubt, if our impulse is to pray, our faith is not failing but acting.

31. Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

As *Jesus* did on other occasions, he made physical contact with the one whom he delivered (Matthew 8:3, 15; 9:29; 14:36; 17:7; 20:34). Even so, Jesus chided Peter for his *doubt*, as he had

previously when the disciples were afraid in a storm (Matthew 8:26; see lesson 2). Peter and the others had had enough experience of Jesus' power and faithfulness to be freed from doubt. But to say there was no good reason for their doubt is not to say that Jesus rejected them because of it. Instead, he delivered them.

When we are guilty of inadequate faith, we can remember what Jesus did in the passage before us. Yes, Peter's faith was weak. Under stress, he was plagued by doubt. But Jesus rescued Peter anyway! Peter's faith was still sufficient to call out to Jesus for help. Our relationship with Jesus depends on how ready we are to recognize our weaknesses and rely on his strength. That extends to trusting that in his strength he can overcome our doubts and worries.

III. Jesus with the Disciples

(MATTHEW 14:32–33)

A. The Wind Ceases (v. 32)

32. And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down.

This storm ended as the earlier one had: as an immediate response from nature to an act from nature's Creator (Matthew 8:26b). We note that Jesus did not rescue Peter by calming the storm, as in Matthew 8:26; rather, Jesus rescued Peter while the storm still raged. The storm disappeared only after *they climbed into the boat*.

Jesus does not always calm the storms of life, but he is always there to rescue or calm us in one way or another. Surely we, like Peter and the other disciples in the boat, have enough reason to trust Jesus! What God has revealed to us about the Son is true and trustworthy, ample reason for confidence (Hebrews 1:2–3; 3:6).

B. The Son of God (v. 33)

33. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

The disciples had just witnessed Jesus demonstrate power available only to God. They saw him empower one of their number to join him in his sovereign control of the deep. As they were reunited with their master, they *worshiped him*, acknowledging his authority and expressing their submission and dependence. They could conclude nothing less than that Jesus was utterly unlike any other.

For the Jewish people of Jesus' time, the phrase *Son of God* first meant that Jesus was God's promised king, the great Son of David (compare Matthew 1:1 with Mark 1:1). Certainly the disciples were affirming at least that much here. Jesus showed his kingly authority in what he had just done. After Jesus' resurrection, Jesus' followers called him Son of God with an enhanced understanding (John 20:31). With this phrase they affirmed him to be both God's king and as God himself.

Conclusion

A. Calling Out for Help

Peter sometimes said and did impressive things. Today's text shows Peter doing something remarkable during a crisis of faith. When he began to doubt, he almost snatched defeat from the jaws of victory! Peter had a problem with consistency.

But Peter is not the most important character in this story. Jesus is. Jesus' power was greater than Peter's doubt, just as it is greater than our doubts. Trusting the Lord, whom we do not see, is hard to maintain when the negative things we do see test our faith. The resulting doubt is the proof that our faith is being tested.

Is doubt, then, a symptom of inconsistent faith? It can be if it is never resolved, if it leads us to abandon our hope and trust in Christ. But if doubt prompts us to call out to the Lord for help, then doubt is a seeking faith—faith that seeks understanding, faith that seeks the divine word of peace in the middle of fear.

When you experienced doubt, did you call out to the Lord? Perhaps you are crying out for help right now. You can know that the Lord hears you and that the certainty of his faithfulness is more important than the size of your faith.

Or maybe your boat is sailing smoothly right now, and you barely think about the Lord's not being in the boat with you. Realize that a time will come when the winds will blow against you all night. And though it may seem that you are alone on the waves, the Lord knows your distress and will come to you if you bid him do so. Remember: he is with you right now as well. He is always with his people, to the end of the age.

B. Prayer

Thank you, Father, for your almighty power at work in Jesus to save and protect us. We affirm his promise not to abandon us, that even when we die, we will live with you. Direct our hearts to you whenever life makes us afraid, we pray. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Cry out to Jesus, who overcomes our doubt.