

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Website: [www.churchredeemeraz.org](http://www.churchredeemeraz.org)

**Series:** The Miracles of Jesus  
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**Pastor/Teacher**  
**Gary L. W. Johnson**

## The Miracle on the Water

**M**any Charismatics argue that the reason why the church has not, and does not today, experience the miraculous is simple: Christians do NOT expect it. God, they tell us, is more than willing to continue working the *same kind* of miracles recorded in the Bible—if (and it is a very big “if”) only *we* would *let* Him.<sup>1</sup> Charismatics claim that they serve a miracle-working God—but actually they limit God—since Christians have to *expect* (or *let*) Him work—otherwise either He won't or can't. The miracle of Jesus walking on the water is one of the most amazing of the miracles ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels (cf. also Mark 6:45 - 52 and John 6:15 - 21), and in light of Charismatic claims, one of the most instructive.

Background: It is late in the day. The miracle of feeding the five thousand has just occurred. Jesus has "constrained"<sup>2</sup> His disciples to cross the Sea of Galilee to the Western shore.

### I. JESUS ALONE

Jesus withdrew unto the mountain to pray. In Mark 1:35, prior to launching His mission work in Capernaum, and in Luke 6:12, before choosing the twelve, He continued all night in prayer (also, mention must be made of Gethsemane, cf. Mark 14:32).

NOTE: The noted N. T. scholar, Joachim Jeremias, argues convincingly that Jesus would have observed with daily regularity the Jewish practice of liturgical prayer three times a day (morning, at sunrise, afternoon, when the afternoon sacrifice was offered in the Temple, and evening, before going to sleep). However, Jesus shatters custom as well, since the Gospels record Him praying for prolonged periods at other times as well. Matthew makes it clear that it must have been a *long* prayer, since it lasted from sundown to the fourth watch of the night (v. 25), which would be between 3 and 6 a.m.<sup>3</sup>

### II. THE DISCIPLES ALONE

Another storm hit the sea. This storm occurred at night (the other in the day) and had not yet reached the force of the one Jesus had stilled (cf. Matthew 8:18 - 27; Mark 4:35 - 41; Luke 8:22 - 25). But it was such that the disciples found themselves toiling "against" (ENANTIOS, used here metaphorically) the wind. This was common for the rainy season (cf. Mark 6:39 and his reference to "green grass"). Strong winds came out of the West—the direction the disciples were headed.<sup>4</sup>

A. The Reason for Their Difficulty. Jesus had sent them on this trip. He had to compel them on this trip. He had to compel them to make it. In other words, they were in the place of the Lord's choosing—and things were contrary to them!

B. Where is the Lord? Another storm, but there is no sleeping Master in the boat with them this time. In Mark's account, we read "and He saw them toiling in rowing" (6:48). Jesus is not in the boat, but He is Lord of the sea and wind. He is NOT with them, but He has His eye on them. All of this is very suggestive for us—regardless of our condition, and how contrary things are to us, we have the same Lord Jesus who watches over us.

### III. THE MIRACLE: JESUS WALKING ON WAVES

Jesus could have spoken to the storm as He did before (cf. NOTES No.3), and this would have enabled the disciples to reach the other side. But Jesus does not do that—rather there is here a demonstration of *power* instead of providence. He is "Mightier than the thunder of the great waters, mightier than the breakers of the sea—the Lord on high is mighty" (Psalm 93:4, 5), and in the words of Job, "He treads on the waves of the sea" (9:8).

A. The Disciples' Response. "Nothing," observed J. C. Ryle, "is found to alarm human nature so much as being suddenly brought into contact with anything apparently supernatural and belonging to another world, and especially in the night."<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that each time the disciples experience anguish it is because they lack faith (Mark 4:35ff, 6:45ff, 9:14ff).<sup>6</sup>

B. The Lord's Declaration. Jesus' words, trans. "It is I" in most versions, can also express deeper significance

as the recognized formula of self-revelation which rests ultimately on the “I am that I am” of Exodus 3:14. Not only the immediate context of the walking on the water but the words with which the emphatic “I” is framed favor the theophanic interpretation. The admonitions to “take heart” and to “have no fear”, which introduce and conclude the “I am he”, are an integral part of the divine formula of self-revelation (e.g. Psalm 115:9ff, 118:5f; Isaiah 41:4 - 13, 43:1ff, 44:2ff, 51:9ff).<sup>7</sup>

#### IV. PETER . . .

Only Matthew records the episode with Peter. V. 28 relates that Peter blurts out, “Lord, if it be Thou, bid me come unto Thee on the water.”<sup>8</sup> “Had there been no name given, we should have had no hesitation in concluding that it was Simon Peter who spoke thus.”<sup>9</sup>

- A. On the Water. In reply to Peter, the Lord bids Peter to come—and he does! How far he actually got, we do not know, but Peter did find himself walking on water. “We might,” says Calvin, “ask why Christ grants Peter’s wish. By doing so He seems to approve it. But the solution is easy. God often looks after us better by denying what we ask. But sometimes He gives way to us so as to convince us of our foolishness by experience.”<sup>10</sup>
- B. In the water. Jesus’ command *enables* Peter to come, but Peter cannot sustain faith—he sees the wind (the storm), and his faith and body sink!
- C. With Jesus. “Lord, save me!” Jesus “immediately” caught Peter by the hand and scolded him with the words, “O you man of little faith, why did you doubt.” Fortunately, as Bruner notes, “Jesus saves *before* He scolds. Jesus deals with His disbelieving believer both tenderly and firmly.”<sup>11</sup>

NOTE: What did Peter doubt? Certainly he exercised some faith by stepping out of the boat, and certainly his faith wavered once he took his eyes off Jesus and became overwhelmed by the storm—but I think we can also say that Peter’s doubt is extended back to his question as to whether it was really Jesus. “Why did you doubt?—helps both Peter and the reader recognize that doubts and fears quickly disappear before a strict inquiry into their cause.”<sup>12</sup>

- D. The Worshipping Disciples. Note the effect the miracle had on them. They “worshiped” (PROSEKUNESAN, the most common word for worship) Jesus. This can only mean that “they regarded Jesus as God’s equal.”<sup>13</sup>

CONCLUSION: Did the disciples *expect* a miracle? Hardly, they were unprepared for what happened. Did this *prevent* Jesus from doing what He did? Of course not. In fact, as we go through the Gospels we find the disciples totally *surprised* by the miracles of Jesus—even the resurrection. If Jesus had acted according to the Charismatic formula (that God can only do miracles in response to our faith), there would have been few, if any, miracles recorded in the Gospels. The miracles of Jesus, especially the miracles of nature, are done by His sovereign will, and are not conditioned by the disposition of His followers.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Oral Roberts, who has served as a link between the Pentecostal tradition and the Charismatic renewal, is only one of a large number who strongly advocates this position. Roberts claims that Jesus personally told him, “Expect a miracle every day.” Cf. *A Daily Guide to Miracles* (Pinoak Pub., 1975), p. 136.

<sup>2</sup> The Greek word, ENAGKASEN, lit. means to force or compel. It also occurs in Mark 6:45 and John 6:15. It would seem that the disciples were sympathetic to the crowd wishing to take and make Jesus King by force.

<sup>3</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (Fortress Press, 1967), p. 75.

<sup>4</sup> John 6:19 tells us that the disciples “had rowed three or three and a half miles” (NIV). This would be about half-way across the lake. Thus Matthew puts it, “in the midst of the sea” (v.24).

<sup>5</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels, III* (rpt. Zondervan, 1947), p. 344.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Wm. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 235. Lane, accurately points out the common, but erroneous, impression conveyed by the trans. of v. 48, “and he would have passed by them.” The text should be rendered, “for he intended to pass their way.” The initial particle is to be understood in an explicative sense rather than as a coordinating conjunction; it introduces a subordinate clause clarifying why Jesus came walking on the water, cf. p. 236.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>8</sup> “In our opinion there is no reason why the particle EI (if), should not be interpreted in the conditional sense,” H. Van Der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus* (E. J. Brill, 1965), p. 661. This is important to the question Jesus will ask him in v. 31.

<sup>9</sup> John Laidlaw, *The Miracles of Our Lord* (Baker, 1956), p. 98.

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, II (Eerdmans, 1972), p. 153.

<sup>11</sup> F. D. Bruner, *The Churchbook: Matthew 13 – 28* (Word, 1990), p. 535.

<sup>12</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, VIII* (Zondervan, 1984), p. 344.

<sup>13</sup> H. N. Ridderbos, *Matthew: Bible Students’ Commentary* (Zondervan, 1987), p. 282.