

## **Mark: Treading Water**

**Mark 6:45-46**

**By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)**

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Now turn with me, if you would, to the Gospel of Mark, and we pick up again where we left off last Wednesday evening, in Mark 6, beginning at verse 45—the section that is very familiar, of Jesus’ walking on the water. You’ll remember that last week we were looking together at the story of the feeding of the five thousand. The disciples had made their way to the northeast section of the Sea of Galilee. Crowds had watched the little boat as it had made its way across, and followed along the shoreline. And towards the end of that afternoon, Jesus feeds them through...His disciples feed them...this great multitude. And we left off as verse 44: “And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men.”

Before we read the passage together, let's come before God in prayer. Let's pray.

*Our gracious God and ever blessed Father, we thank You for Your word; that no prophecy of Scripture comes by private interpretation, but men moved by the Holy Spirit—driven, carried along by the Holy Spirit—spoke. And we thank You for this written Scripture, this infallible, inerrant word of truth that lies before us this evening. We ask for Your blessing. Come, Holy Spirit, grant us light, illumination, insight into Your word for Jesus’ sake. Amen.*

Hear with me the word of God.

And immediately He made His disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side to Bethsaida, while He Himself was sending the multitude away. And after bidding them farewell, He departed to the mountain to pray. And when it was evening, the boat was in the midst of the sea, and He was alone on the land. And seeing them straining at the oars, for the wind was against them, at about the fourth watch of the night, He came to them, walking on the sea; and He intended to pass by them. But when they saw Him walking on the sea, they supposed that it was a ghost, and cried out; for they all saw Him and were frightened. But immediately He spoke with them and said to them, “Take courage; it is I, do not be afraid.” And He got into the boat with them, and the wind

stopped; and they were greatly astonished, for they had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves, but their heart was hardened. And when they had crossed over they came to land at Gennesaret, and moored to the shore. And when they had come out of the boat, immediately the people recognized Him, and ran about that whole country and began to carry about on their pallets those who were sick, to the place they heard He was. And wherever he entered villages, or cities, or countryside, they were laying the sick in the market places, and entreating Him that they might just touch the fringe of His cloak; and as many as touched it were being cured.

Amen. May God add His blessing to the reading of his holy and inerrant word.

I sat in a seminary class thirty years ago. It was a seminary that I attended for two years or so, a liberal Presbyterian seminary, now faculty-adjunct status of the University of Wales. And it was a Greek class; we were translating the Gospel of Mark. And I remember we were in this passage, Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee. And I recall it being pointed out to me, something of the various nuances of Mark's Greek style. But what I remember most is the ridicule that I was subjected to because I made it clear in a fairly naive sort of fashion, as I recall, that I actually believed this story to be true: that Jesus actually did walk on the Sea of Galilee.

You see, for about two hundred years or so now, since the time of The Enlightenment, Emanuel Kant and Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Jefferson, in your own country here, folk have denied that things like this happened. The results of empirical science of Newtonian physics tell us that gravity, heavier bodies coming into contact with water—surface tension notwithstanding—implies that these sort of things just don't happen. And it's true that you and I, whilst we may have seen a fly or some insect walk, due to surface tension, on the surface of the water, we've never seen a human being walk on anything like the Sea of Galilee.

And then, along came Albert Schweitzer. Some of you may have had the misfortune of coming across Albert Schweitzer—not in the flesh, you understand—but in one of his books, and especially the most famous of his books, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, in which he systematically removes from the Scriptures all references to the miraculous, and to the supernatural; claiming that what actually happened here in this narrative is what happens to all fishing and lake stories: they become exaggerated. And what the disciples probably saw was Jesus walking either on a sand bank, or walking on the edge of the Sea of Galilee, and they concluded—or at least the story is...it got told and retold—became Jesus' walking closer and closer to them on the actual Sea of Galilee itself.

I remember thirty years ago reading a book, and I've not looked at it since, by a

very eminent scholar of the twentieth century, a Dr. Vincent Taylor, the guru of New Testament theology in the Methodist church, probably the leading theologian and biblical critic in the Methodist church in the twentieth century. His commentary on the synoptic gospels, his commentary on Mark's gospel, caused an enormous stir. It was much sought after and read. And what did the eminent Vincent Taylor say about this story? That what happened was that they saw, wading through the surf, near the hidden shore, Jesus. And this was interpreted as a triumphant progress across the waters. It sounds like a Californian life-saver, according to Vincent Taylor.

Well, I tell you that because some of you were raised in churches that reinterpreted the miracles of the Bible along that way. Some of you have heard such interpretations perhaps in school or college. Anyway, I expressed then in a seminary classroom, as a physics major, you understand, at university, that I actually believed that Jesus not only could, but actually did walk on the surface of the Sea of Galilee. And you know, my friends, if you believe that Jesus is the Creator of the universe, last night's *Nova* four-hour special notwithstanding for those of you who might have seen that thing last night on public television about the origin of the universe, if we really believe that Jesus created the universe, where's the problem here? Can I say it? This is a trifling little thing. I mean, really! This is a trifling little thing for the Creator of the universe to walk on the Sea of Galilee!

Now, let's get to the scene, because Jesus dismisses the disciples. The five thousand, maybe ten thousand—five thousand men, it says—have been fed. And now Jesus sends the disciples away. It's a somewhat strange thing. He puts them into the boat. The Greek is very strong: He made them get into the boat. You have this picture of Jesus saying to the disciples, sort of hustling them into the boat on the edge of the Sea of Galilee, and saying, 'Go!'; and perhaps some of them protesting and saying, 'But, Master, we prefer to stay with You!' And Jesus is saying, 'No, go! Go to the other side. I'll join you later.'

Now, the explanation for that most commonly given is that amongst this great crowd, these thousands of people on the shore, were all kinds of messianic views and expectations. And it's obvious from the story itself that the disciples are not clear who Jesus is. The disciples don't recognize Him at first when He walks, thinking perhaps they've seen a ghost. And perhaps in order to protect them from the hysteria of this crowd, He bids the disciples leave in a boat and go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee while He himself dismisses this crowd. Well, I want us to see three things from the passage tonight.

### **I. The first thing is this: that the disciples find themselves in trouble.**

They find themselves in trouble. They find themselves in what the other gospels describe as a storm, a tropical storm. Tonight we can imagine something of what

they find themselves in. The Sea of Galilee is six hundred feet below sea level. And it's two thousand feet below the surrounding hills and Mt. Hermon especially, way up to the northeast. And at night, when the temperature cools, that cold air can come quickly down the side of that mountain and cause what's called a squall, or a storm, and it actually has a name: the *searah*, the storm on the Sea of Galilee, and it was greatly feared, even by some experienced fishermen on the Sea of Galilee.

Now, a couple of things here: notice how suddenly they find themselves in trouble. You know, a few hours earlier they were witnessing one of the most astonishing things they'd seen in their entire lives—that as Jesus (as perhaps this is how it happened), that as He handed to them these loaves and these fishes, it kept on coming. It kept on multiplying. They had witnessed with their own eyes, handled with their own hands, an astonishing miracle of our Lord. They were in the seventh heaven. They were near to Jesus; they were seeing the kingdom of God advancing. They were seeing the presence of the divine Messiah in their very midst. You can imagine how excited they must have been. And within hours they find themselves in trouble. Just like you can be in a church service and surrounded by Christian friends and brothers, and the word of God is coming home to you and encouraging you, and challenging you, motivating you. And you're thrilled by that, captivated by it, and drawn into the presence of Jesus! And you go home and you're thinking about it all the way home, and then you open the front door and....bang. And you descend into reality once again, and there's a storm, and there's a problem, and there are difficulties, and there are tensions, and there are quarrels, and there are arguments. How quickly we can find ourselves moving from a period of blessing to a period of trouble.

But they're not just that, but they're in trouble—and note this—they're in trouble because they did what Jesus told them to do. Now you might understand...we might expect, from one point of view, that trouble would come when you disobeyed Jesus. When Jonah finds himself in a storm in a boat on the sea, we're told it was a consequence of his rebellion. God was catching up with him. We might expect that. But you see what's being taught here: through no fault of their own...actually the very opposite, an act of obedience on their part to the very commandment of Jesus, they find themselves in trouble. They find themselves in difficulty. They'd done everything right, and they still end up in trouble. You follow Jesus, you pray to Him, to express your love and adoration for Him, and still you get into trouble.

It's the fourth watch of the night, somewhere between four and six in the morning. They'd been on this lake for a long time. It was probably still light, it was springtime; the grass was green, you remember, in the feeding of the five thousand. So it got dark...maybe six o'clock, let's say seven o'clock...they probably got into the boat roughly about that time. They'd been on this lake for maybe eight hours, maybe nine hours. Normally you could cross from one side to the other in under six hours. They're still only in the middle of the lake. They're

not making any headway. They find themselves in trouble! They're straining on the oars, but they're not making any headway. They're running on empty. They're not making any ground. And do you note, sometimes, my friends, you get into trouble through no fault of your own; that even obeying Jesus will sometimes get you into trouble. The disciples find themselves in trouble. They find themselves at the mercy of winds and waves. They find themselves in a storm, and all because they did exactly what Jesus told them to do.

Don't be surprised, my friends, don't be surprised if you follow Jesus and you heed His word, and you pray prayers like, "I want to be closer to You, Lord; I want to be a better disciple; I want to be more useful for You." Don't be surprised if that means a storm is coming. Don't whine when the storm comes. Don't complain when the storm comes, because here were these dear disciples, and in obeying Jesus they found themselves in a storm. Don't be surprised, my friends, if you find yourselves in trouble tonight. You've come to the prayer meeting to be with God's people, to be in the house of God, to make your prayers and petitions known, and you've taken part in prayer or you've listened to the prayer of others, but you're in a storm tonight—in your mind, in your heart, in your home, in your marriage, in your place of work, with your children. Don't be surprised. Here are these disciples, and they find themselves in trouble.

## **II. Well, secondly, I want us to see that they thought—here's the conclusion that they draw—they thought Jesus was ignoring them.**

Now let's explore that a little. It's difficult to be precise here, but the fact that 'evening' is mentioned in verse 47 and 'fourth watch of the night' is mentioned in verse 48, we've drawn the probable conclusion that they've been in this storm for several hours. For several hours they've been straining at the oars. For several hours, and Jesus has not come to them. He's allowed them to pass through this storm for several hours without doing anything about it.

It's worse than that. In verse 48 we read that "He saw them." He could see them out on the lake. I don't think we need to interpret this...it may be, but I don't think we need to interpret this as the divine sight of Jesus, but simply the human sight of Jesus. He could see them, no more and no less. He was on the mountain, there might have been some ambient light even in the midst of this storm, and every now and then—perhaps there was a lamp on the storm of some kind, and He could see it out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, and He could see they're in trouble. Jesus can see His disciples in trouble, but still He doesn't come.

And then something extraordinary in verse 48: He comes to them, but then we read this extraordinary statement that "He intended, He meant, to pass by them." Isn't that weird? Now, isn't that strange? He's finally coming! At last, Jesus is coming, not that the disciples recognized Him, even when He came, but at last He's coming, but He intends to pass them by. And do you know...do you know

what that draws from us? Do you know the conclusion that that draws from us? We're tempted to draw the conclusion that Jesus really doesn't care.

Now, maybe you don't put it as crassly as I've just put it there, but I wonder if deep down you sometimes think that. You've been praying about a certain matter for weeks, maybe months, maybe years. I have some things on my prayer list that have been there for thirty-five years. I'll be absolutely honest with you. There are times when I think Jesus doesn't care. There. I've said it. I'm ashamed about it. It's a sin. It's a terrible sin. But there are times when providence forces me into a position to draw out that false conclusion, that Jesus just doesn't care. And sometimes He seems to taunt you; He seems to give the sign that He's about to answer your prayer, and then take it away again. But He comes, He actually comes towards these disciples, but He intends to pass them by....like a....oh, I know you don't like cats here, but I love cats! Like a cat. You know how a cat will play with something...with a half-dead mouse? You know, it will just poke it. Just try to make it move a little more, and then put its paw on it. As if God is playing games, Jesus is playing games here with the disciples. What's going on?

Oh! He's testing them. That's what's going on. How wrong we can be in interpreting providence. How terribly wrong we can be. Where is Jesus, anyway? Where's He been all this time? He's been up the mountain, praying. Now, understand, friends, just how astonishing a thing that is: that the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity; the divine Messiah; the Lord incarnate is praying. He's beseeching His heavenly Father. He's bringing His petitions before His heavenly Father. He's "found in a low condition," as our *Shorter Catechism* describes the incarnation of Jesus, and He needs the help of His Father. He needs the filling of the Holy Spirit so that He can be enabled to fulfill the task of being the covenant Mediator. And no doubt, although the text doesn't tell us, but no doubt part of His prayers were on behalf of these disciples. I can't imagine but that He wasn't praying for these disciples. He would look out to them on the sea, and He'd say, 'Heavenly Father, just look after them for Me. Take care of them for Me. Make sure none of them drops down into the sea, or drowns. It's OK for them to get wet; yes, let the wind blow in their face, and yes, rock the boat a little bit, make them feel a little queasy because I need to test them, I need to teach them something. But take care of them. Make sure that not one of them perishes.'

Do you know that's how Jesus prays for you all the time? That "we have a Great High Priest who sits at the right hand of God who ever lives to intercede for us," the Book of Hebrews says? And that's what He's doing for you right now. He's interceding for you, my friend. He's bringing you by name—by name—and He's bringing you before His Father's throne and He's interceding on your behalf. That's where Jesus was. You see, the disciples were drawing the conclusion that Jesus' absence meant He wasn't doing anything. But He was interceding with His heavenly Father on their behalf.

You see, “their hearts,” the text says in verse 52, “were hardened.” They’d just—oh, my friends, get it!—they had just seen Jesus feed the five thousand, but they hadn’t drawn the right conclusions! They didn’t get it. How slow they were to get it! You know, sometimes we think that if Jesus were to do some miraculous thing our lives would be altogether changed in an instant. Don’t believe it for one minute. Don’t you believe it for one minute. They had witnessed an astonishing miracle, but their hearts were still hardened. They needed to learn a lesson. You know, I just wonder...the text doesn’t say so, but I just wonder if the disciples were beginning to think, ‘Maybe that feeding of the five thousand had something to do with me. You know, maybe there is something special about me after all.’ And within a few hours they’re at the mercy of a storm and crying out for their lives, and Jesus is saying, ‘You know what? You need to learn apart from Me, you can do nothing. Apart from Me, you can do nothing.’

### **III. Well, there's a third thing I want us to see, and that is that in their weakness they experienced Jesus' tender care.**

Let's see a couple of things here. First of all, He walks on the water. You know, at the end of the day, that's not the biggest thing in this story. We tend to focus on that, you know, and the physicist in me wants to try and explain exactly what happened. But you know, that's not the biggest thing in this story. He walks on the water. Do you know that the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic for the word “impossible” was two feet of water, because you can't walk on two feet of water? What's happening? It's a demonstration; it's a revelation of His glory. It's a demonstration that even the molecules of water must hold up the feet of their sovereign Lord. It's a demonstration of His transcendent glory, that the King of Kings is in their midst.

Notice again that He intends to pass them by. Now, we've seen how odd that may appear, but we need to try and explain why He intended to pass them by. And of course, if you know your Old Testament, you are already picking up the allusion to the fact that when God revealed His glory to Moses on Mt. Sinai in Exodus 33, or to Elijah on Mt. Horeb in that wonderful incident when He wasn't in the storm, and He wasn't in the fires (the choir was reminding us on Sunday morning), but He was in the still, small voice. But you know, in both passages we read that God passed them by, that as God's glory passed it was as though He was passing them by. And Mark, I think, is deliberately drawing the allusion that when Jesus is walking on the water towards these disciples, He's appearing to them in the very form that God had appeared to Moses on Mt. Sinai, and to Elijah on Mt. Horeb. This is the Lord, the Lord of glory. This is Jehovah Jesus. This is Yahweh Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee. And to confirm it, He says, “It is I.” And that has so many allusions to the divine name in the Old Testament, the name that God gave to Moses: “I Am that I Am.” And then it was shortened to “I Am”, and it sounds like the word Yahweh, or Jehovah. And Jesus is giving to them a revelation of His glory, a glimpse of His greatness; of the transcendent

Lord that He truly is. And it moved them greatly.

And Jesus gets into the boat now. Do you notice....oh! I wish we had time to draw this out! Jesus didn't stop the storm and then walk on the water, He walked through the storm and got into the boat when the storm was still raging, and only then did the storm cease. Do you see what that says to you? That Jesus actually draws near to you in the midst of your trouble and identifies Himself with that trouble? And the disciples are astonished! At first they think they've seen a ghost, but then they're astonished. And it's that word that the gospels, so many on so many occasions, use to describe the sort of goose-pimplly effect of being in the presence of the transcendent Lord, and it sends shivers down your spine.

And those beautiful words that Jesus says to the disciples: "Take courage...and be not afraid." Take courage and be not afraid. "Fear not, I am with you... Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; surely I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand...Let not your hearts be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in Me," Jesus said. My friend, is that the word you need tonight in the midst of your trouble and trial and difficulty? The reassuring words of your sovereign Savior who loves you and cares for you, and promises in covenant blood to protect you from all of your foes: Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid, for "I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

May God bless His word to us, for His name's sake. Let's stand and pray, and receive the Lord's benediction.

*Father, we thank You for Your word, and especially we thank You for this wonderful glimpse of our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and His love and care for His disciples, and for us, too. Receive our thanks, and write it upon our hearts for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

*May grace, mercy and peace be with you all. Amen.*

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