

3. The subsequent episode in John's account involved Jesus walking to His disciples on the Sea of Galilee during a furious storm (6:16-21). Again, Matthew and Mark also recorded this event while Luke omitted it (he may not have known about it). Matthew's record is the most extensive and he alone recounted Peter's attempt to follow Jesus' example (14:28-31). For his part, John provided a very brief, skeletal sketch without any elaboration or commentary. The fact that he included this episode shows that he believed it had a role to play in his account; the way in which he presented it indicates that he didn't view that role as central. It's possible John included it to provide the narrative transition between the two main components of his account, namely the feeding event near Bethsaida and Jesus' discourse on the following day. (Recall again John's pattern of combining events and discourses (works and interpretive words) in order to disclose Jesus to his readers as the incarnate Logos – Yahweh's tangible communication to men.)
  - a. Because John's record is skeletal, it must be harmonized with those of Matthew and Mark to get a full sense of this episode. It seems, then, that after the multitude had eaten, Jesus sent them away even as He dispatched His disciples to go ahead of Him by boat to the other side of the Sea. Mark had them going to Bethsaida (6:45), while John indicated that Capernaum was their destination (6:17, 24). Matthew and Mark recorded that Jesus stayed behind to spend some time in prayer (Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:46), but the subsequent events show that He had another reason for sending the disciples down into the Sea without Him: This crossing was to be another test of their faith – *another step in Jesus' self-disclosure to His disciples by which He would confront them with their misconceptions and shallow faith* (Mark 6:51-52; cf. Matthew 14:28-31). Even those closest to Jesus – those who knew Him best and were devoted to Him as Israel's Messiah – didn't really discern Him or His purpose in the world.
  - b. Jesus dispatched His disciples to the other side of the Sea of Galilee knowing what lay ahead. As they made their way westward toward Capernaum a strong, contrary wind arose out of the west driving waves against the bow of the boat. Though the disciples departed before dark (6:17), by the fourth watch of the night (which begins at 3:00 A.M.) they'd traveled only about three miles. (Given the short distance by water from the northeast shore of the Sea to Capernaum, John's account indicates that the storm had driven the boat off course.) Hours of rowing left the disciples exhausted and they likely feared their boat would be swamped before they could reach their destination. Apprehension was warranted, and all the more because their Lord wasn't with them.
  - c. Seated on the hillside, Jesus felt the building storm and knew well what His disciples were experiencing down on the Sea. But He had a plan for them in this circumstance; indeed, the fact that the wind ceased as soon as He climbed into the boat shows that the storm was His dutiful servant (ref. Matthew 14:32; cf. Mark 4:35-41). Everything Jesus did was purposeful and this episode was no exception. He sent His disciples into a storm, delayed coming to them and then came in the manner He did, all to teach them a critical truth: *Faith is antithetical to sight; it is trusting Him and His Father when there is no natural basis or reason for it.*

And so it was that the disciples found themselves in the middle of the Sea, blown about and battered by waves in the darkness, exhausted and unable to get their tiny boat to the shore. They were at the end of their wits and strength, and it was at that moment that Jesus came to them. Pulling on the oars to drive the boat westward into the storm, the disciples were looking back to the east and caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure moving toward them over the surface of the water. The figure appeared to be a man, but they knew that was impossible; the only option was that they were seeing an apparition. If they were already fearing for their lives, now they were terrified and cried out in alarm (Matthew 14:25-26; Mark 6:49-50). At the time He them away Jesus doubtless assured His disciples that He would rejoin them later; *now He was doing so and they were terrified.*

The Twelve left that day believing Jesus would come to them, but they never imagined this scenario. Indeed, they *couldn't* have because it was outside the bounds of natural human experience and reasoning. As fisherman they knew well the deadly peril they were facing and reasoned that, unless Jesus could somehow find them in the dark in His own boat, they were beyond His help. If He were to rejoin them, it would be in Capernaum after they somehow managed to survive the storm and get to shore. They had taken Jesus at His word, but with natural minds; *their faith was actually sight.* As long as they could fit Jesus' words and works into their notions and expectations, the disciples had no difficulty believing Him and embracing Him as the Messiah. Apparently nothing of all that He had said and done to that point had forced them to set aside their natural notions of Him. Even the astonishing occurrence a few hours earlier didn't govern their thoughts and conclusions when they saw a human figure coming to them across the water; it was easier to believe they were seeing a ghost than their Lord who'd just fed thousands of people with one boy's food provision.

- d. When Jesus saw the disciples' response He called out to them, assuring them that it was Him and they needn't be afraid. In that moment their fear turned to utter astonishment; what were they to make of a man who could walk across the waves in the midst of a raging storm? Realizing what they were observing must have left the disciples dumbfounded, but as soon as Peter regained his wits he called to Jesus to enable him to do what He Himself was doing (Matthew 14:28).

Not surprisingly, scholars have differed regarding Peter's motivation; some have seen it as an act of faith while others believe it was just one more impulsive action by a generally impetuous man. The latter view is certainly substantiated by the gospel writers' depiction of Peter, but Peter's impetuosity and his faith were not mutually exclusive. Rather, Peter tended to express his faith in impulsive ways (cf. Matthew 16:13-23, 17:1-5, 19:16-27; Mark 14:26-31; John 13:1-9, 31-38, 18:1-11; etc.) and that was likely the case here. Peter clearly was convinced that, if Jesus directed him to come to Him walking on the Sea, he would be able to do so; if the Lord had this sort of mastery over the elements, He could exercise that mastery on behalf of other people. And so when Jesus called to him to come, Peter eagerly climbed out of the boat and into the wind-driven waves.

But as soon as Peter stepped onto the lake and began to walk his natural judgment flooded back upon him. He realized what he'd done and remembered that men cannot walk on water. Beyond that, he was attempting this feat in the midst of a raging storm. And when his mind turned back to the impossibility of what he was trying to do, Peter immediately began to sink under the waves; what he'd concluded was impossible had indeed become impossible (Matthew 14:29-30).

- e. Overcome with fear and sinking down, Peter cried out to Jesus to save him and the Lord reached out and took hold of him. With that they both returned to the boat and climbed into it. Matthew and Mark recorded that the wind became still immediately after Jesus and Peter entered the boat, leaving the disciples astonished. Matthew's account has them marveling and worshipping Jesus as the Son of God; Mark's has them dumbfounded, unable to grasp what they had just experienced: They "*had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves, but their hearts were hardened*" (cf. Matthew 14:32; Mark 6:51). At first glance these two records appear inconsistent, if not contradictory, and some have opted for Matthew's version since he was present at the time. But the accounts are easily reconciled and, in this way, become mutually interpreting. Taken together, they indicate that the disciples expressed their astonishment in the most natural way, namely in reverential awe of the man they believed to be the Messiah – the Son of God (ref. John 1:49, 11:21-27; cf. also Matthew 27:37-43). They acknowledged and worshipped Jesus, but with dull, insensitive hearts that were unable to discern Him in truth. *Their worship was sincere, but lacking in insight and understanding* (cf. Matthew 20:20, 28:17; ref. also Acts 10:25); while believing, they were yet marked by unbelief (Matthew 14:31; cf. Mark 8:11-21).
  
- f. Matthew and Mark ended their accounts with Jesus entering the boat and the storm subsiding. For his part, John omitted the whole episode with Peter, but recorded that, when Jesus identified Himself to His frightened disciples and they received Him into the boat, the group of men found themselves immediately at their destination (6:20-21). Many have understood this statement as indicating yet another miracle in which the boat was supernaturally transported to the shore in an instant. Certainly this could be John's meaning (ref. Mark 6:47), but his statement can also be interpreted in a different way. First of all, the adverb John employed denotes immediacy, but immediacy is a relative idea. Thus the term often specifies an action which occurs at that very moment, but other times the action is only *near* in time (cf. Matthew 24:29; Acts 9:18-20, 17:9-10, 13-14, 21:30; Galatians 1:15-17; James 1:23-24; 3 John 14). So John may have simply been indicating that the disciples found themselves at the shore only a short time after Jesus entered the boat and calmed the storm. If this was his meaning, then he was highlighting the disciples' sense that they were facing death in the middle of the lake when they were actually close to the shore. Their fears were, in various ways, grounded in what they *thought* was true, not what was actually true. In the end, and regardless of whether John was indicating a miraculous event, it was Jesus' presence which enabled the disciples to see what they could not otherwise see and this illumination confronted them yet again with their lack of faith.