

John 6:14–21

Introduction

Last week we saw Jesus go up on the mountain and miraculously spread an abundant feast for all the guests at His table. With just five barley cakes and two fish, Jesus fed 5000 men plus women and children. After they had “as much as they wanted” and “ate their fill” the leftovers were then gathered up – twelve baskets full. So after seeing what Jesus has done, the question we asked last week was this: How should we respond to what He has done? How should we respond to this sign once we’ve truly understood it? Should we make a list of all that we’ve deemed our needs to be and then come to Jesus assuming that He will meet those “needs” according to our expectations? Is that what this sign means? Or does this sign call us to come to Jesus humbly, *trusting* that He who fed the crowds with five barley cakes and two fish must know what all our true needs are, and *confident* that He will meet all our needs according to the limitless resources of His divine power and His own perfect wisdom and love? Do we see only a miracle that leads us to come to Jesus presumptuously expecting, or do we see a sign that leads us to come to Jesus humbly and confidently surrendering? We already know why the crowd was following Jesus: “Because they saw the signs that He was doing on the sick.” But they didn’t *understand*. So we’re not surprised when we read in verses 14-15:

I. John 6:14–15 — When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain—he alone.

If John had said only that “Jesus withdrew again to the mountain” we might have assumed He withdrew from the crowd but took His disciples with Him. We know that the last time Jesus “went up on the mountain,” His disciples *were* with Him.

➤ John 6:3 — Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down *with his disciples*.

But now notice the contrast: “Jesus withdrew *again* to the mountain—*He alone* [*autos monos*].” Given this contrast and the Greek expression itself (*autos monos*) and its placement at the very end of the sentence, the point seems to be very emphatically that He withdrew again to the mountain, this time without with His disciples—He alone. So there’s a sense in which we’re to understand that Jesus is “withdrawing” not only from the crowd, but even from His own disciples. We know there were times when Jesus wanted to be alone with His Father (cf. Mk. 1:35-37) and that’s certainly the case here (cf. Mk. 6:46), but in context the reason we’re given for Jesus’ withdrawal is that He perceived “that the people were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king.” The implication, then, is that even the disciples had been caught up in the excitement of the crowd. Can you imagine 5000 men (*andros*) ready to make Jesus king? And who are the disciples? They’re the “inner circle” closest to Jesus. They’re the ones who just served as the “administrators” of this miracle, having the people sit down and distributing the food (cf. Mk. 6:41) and collecting what was left over. Can you see how easy it would have been for the disciples to see in this moment the makings of the Messiah’s kingdom and of their own privileged places of honor within that kingdom (cf. Mk. 10:35-45)? We shouldn’t imagine the disciples as exceptionally arrogant and self-seeking people (any more than we are!), but they hadn’t yet understood the requirement for true greatness in the Messiah’s kingdom; and connected with this, they hadn’t yet truly understood the *absoluteness* of Jesus’ *lordship*. This is

why they were being caught up in the misguided excitement of the crowd. And this is why Jesus withdrew again to the mountain—“He alone”—this time without His disciples. This explains why Mark says:

- Mark 6:45 — Immediately he *made* his disciples get into the boat and go *before* him to the other side.

The Greek word for “made” means “to force” or “to compel” (Lk. 14:23; Acts 26:11; 28:19; 2 Cor. 12:11; Gal. 2:3, 14; 6:12). The implication is that the disciples didn’t want to go, but that Jesus was insisting they did. You could say the disciples needed time to “cool off,” but they needed more than that. They needed to be *confronted* with the true nature—with the absoluteness—of Jesus’ lordship. So having told us that Jesus has withdrawn to the mountain alone, John now has us join the disciples who are also now alone.

II. John 6:16–19a — When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, and getting into a boat, they started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles...

Compare the euphoria the disciples must have been feeling after their participation with Jesus in His feeding of the five thousand with the helpless isolation they’re experiencing now out on the Sea of Galilee. That seems to be the point John is emphasizing. After saying that they went down to the sea at evening time, John adds the detail that while they were on the sea it had grown “dark” and also that Jesus had “not yet come to them.” At least some of the disciples would have been very accustomed to being out on the sea in the dark as fishermen, but the point here is that they’ve been cut off and separated from Jesus who just a few hours before was on the verge of being proclaimed “king.” John emphasizes not only their isolation, but also their helplessness. “The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing.” What should probably have been a trip of only two miles along the northern shore of the sea of Galilee (Bethsaida to Capernaum) had already turned into at least three to four miles of hard rowing as the wind and the waves pushed them far off their course and probably even threatened to keep them from ever reaching their destination. Just a few hours before they must have felt like they could conquer the world with Jesus. Now, isolated from Jesus in the dark on the sea, they’re being reminded of how totally frail and helpless they really are.

The sea, in the Bible, symbolizes the ultimate threat to men. It was out of the primeval waters of the deep that God raised up the dry land for man to dwell on (Gen. 1). It’s the sea in Exodus that stands in the way of God’s people and threatens to swallow them up (Exod. 14-15). This explains why the new creation is described symbolically as no longer having any sea (cf. Rev. 21:1). The sea is personified in the Bible as a monster: Rahab, Leviathan, a dragon, a serpent (Job 7:12; 26:12-13; Ps. 74:12-14; 89:9-10; Isa. 27:1; 51:9-10). Some of the disciples made their living fishing on the sea and no doubt there would have been some sense in which they loved the sea, but they would also have known better than anyone else how fearful and terrifying the sea could be and how helpless they could be before it. We read in Psalm 107:

- Psalm 107:23–27 — Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters; they saw the deeds of the LORD, his wondrous works in the deep. For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven;

they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their evil plight; they reeled and staggered like drunken men and were at their wits' end.

In the Bible, the sea is to man a chaotic, unpredictable, and uncontrollable force of nature subject only to God Himself. And so even apart from any deep, theological meaning, the point here in John is that the disciples are confronted now by this power against which they are totally helpless. After the feeding of the five thousand, and their visions of grandeur and glory, this is exactly where they need to be. After their willingness to be accomplices with a misguided crowd that wanted to “make” Jesus king, this is exactly where they need to be. After their failure to truly understand the meaning of the five barley cakes and the two fish, this is exactly where they need to be.

III. John 6:19 —When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened.

In Matthew's Gospel Peter is said to walk on the “water” (Mat. 14:28-29), but the Bible never says that Jesus walked on the water. The Bible only and always says that Jesus walked on the sea (Mat. 14:25-26). To say that Jesus was “walking on the sea” is to say that Jesus is Lord of the sea. To say that Jesus was “walking on the sea” is to say that Jesus is not helpless before the sea, but sovereign over the sea. But who is the only Sovereign Lord over the sea? It was God Himself who asked Job from out of the whirlwind:

- Job 38:8-11 (cf. 9:8; Ps. 29:3-4, 10-11; Hab. 3:15) — Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb, when I made clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed limits for it and set bars and doors, and said, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed”?

The Psalmist celebrates God's almighty power and rule over all the nations in this way:

- Psalm 65:5-7 — By awesome deeds you answer us with righteousness, O God of our salvation, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas; the one who by his strength established the mountains, being girded with might; who stills the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples...
- Psalm 89:9 — You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them.

And so now it's in this light that as the disciples are struggling vainly against the sea, we see Jesus coming near the boat, “walking on the sea.”

But whether the disciples could see that this looked like Jesus or not (and I think they could), John tells us that they were frightened. Mark tells us that they thought they were seeing a phantom or an apparition – a ghost (Mk. 6:49). Why would they think that? Because, of course, a *man* (even if He *is* Jesus) cannot walk on the sea. The disciples had not truly understood the sign of the five barley cakes and the two fish. Was the one who fed the five thousand not also sovereign over the sea? Was the one who spread the table in the “wilderness” only a miracle worker (cf. 2 Kings 4:42-44) who could satisfy the needs of men? Was He not also the Sovereign Lord of all creation before whom all men are called to bow down in humble submission? It's only when we see Jesus in the “absoluteness” of His lordship (cf. Ridderbos), independently of

all our “needs,” that we can truly rejoice in His provision and in the salvation and the deliverance that He brings to us.

If the disciples were not as misguided or as carnally minded as the crowd, they still had not understood the meaning of the five barley cakes and the two fish (cf. Mk. 6:51-52). This is why the disciples need to be alone and helpless in the dark out on the sea. This is why the disciples need to see Jesus coming to them “walking on the sea.” This is even why the disciples need to be frightened. *So that* we can read now in verse twenty—and hear with them—these words:

IV. John 6:20 — But he said to them, “It is I [*ego eimi*]; do not be afraid [*me phobeo*].”

In chapter nine, the man who was born blind and who had been healed by Jesus can say to those who doubted that he was really the man born blind: “It is I [*ego eimi*]” (Jn. 9:9). In 2 Samuel, Abner can look behind him and ask, “Is it you, Asahel?” And Asahel can answer, “It is I [*ego eimi*]” (2 Sam. 2:20; LXX). But when Jesus comes to His disciples walking on the sea and says, “It is I [*ego eimi*],” we hear more than “just” a man.

- Exodus 3:14 — God said to Moses, “**I AM [*ego eimi*] WHO I AM.**”
- Isaiah 41:4 — Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD, the first, and with the last; **I am he [it is I; *ego eimi*].**
- Isaiah 43:10 — “You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that **I am he [it is I; *ego eimi*].** Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.

When Jesus walks on the sea and says to His frightened disciples, “It is I; do not be afraid,” He’s not saying, “It’s *just Me*; don’t be afraid.” Their fear in the presence of Jesus who even walks on the sea—even when they know that this is Jesus—would be completely justified (cf. Mk. 4:40-41; Lk. 5:5-11). If Jesus had said *only*, “it is I,” why shouldn’t the disciples still fear and tremble? But that’s not all Jesus says, is it? Even as Jesus reveals Himself to His disciples in the absoluteness of His lordship, it’s this same self-revelation that initially produces such fear that in the end powerfully drives away all our fears. John writes in Revelation of his response to a vision of Jesus in His glory:

- Revelation 1:17–18 — When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “**Do not be afraid [*me phobeo*], I am [*ego eimi*] the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.**”

When Jesus came to the disciples *walking on the sea*, they were frightened. But Jesus said to them: “*It is I; do not be afraid.*” It is **I**; and now in light of who I am—in light of the absoluteness of My lordship—do not be afraid. It is *I*. I am here. I am with you. *Do not be afraid.* In the Old Testament there’s only *one* who speaks with words like these.

- Genesis 26:24 — The LORD appeared to [Isaac]... and said, “I am the God of Abraham your father. **Do not be afraid [*me phobeo*], for I am [*ego eimi*] with you [it is I who am with you] and will bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham’s sake.**”
- Genesis 46:3–4 — [The LORD] said [to Jacob], “**I am [*ego eimi*] God [it is I who am God], the God of your father. Do not be afraid [*me phobeo*] to go down to Egypt, for there I will**

make you into a great nation. **I myself will go down with you** to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again.”

- Isaiah 41:10 — ...**do not be afraid** [*me phobeo*], for I am [*eimi*] with you [it is I who am with you]; be not dismayed, for I am [*ego eimi*] your God [it is I who am your God]; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.
- Jeremiah 46:27–28 [LXX: 26:27-28; cf. Jer. 1:6-8; 30:10-11] — **Do not be afraid** [*me phobeo*], O Jacob my servant, nor be dismayed, O Israel, for behold, I will save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return and have quiet and ease, and none shall make him afraid. **Do not be afraid** [*me phobeo*], O Jacob my servant, declares the LORD, for I am [*ego eimi*] with you [it is I who am with you].

It's in the light of all this Old Testament context and of the Old Testament revelation that only God is sovereign over the sea that *Jesus* comes now to His disciples “walking on the sea” and saying to them: “It is I; do not be afraid.” On the one hand, Jesus will never, ever be what men “want to make of Him and use Him for” (Ridderbos). Jesus will never, ever be what *we* want to make of Him and use Him for. And yet even as Jesus reveals Himself to us in the absoluteness of His lordship, it's this very self-revelation that might initially produce such fear and trembling that powerfully drives away all our fears. So we read in verse twenty-one:

V. John 6:21a — Then they were willing to receive him into the boat...

Just the previous day, the people were planning to take Jesus by force and make Him king and the disciples were being swept away by their zeal. But now we see a very different picture. Now the disciples—recognizing their own helplessness and seeing more clearly the absoluteness of His lordship (cf. Mat. 14:33)—now the disciples are “willing to receive Him into the boat.” The New Living Translation, by translating wrongly here, might help us to see better the true meaning: “Then they were *eager* to let him in the boat.” Do you see how this emphasizes the zeal of the disciples and puts them in charge (“they were *eager* to let him”)—reminding us again of the zeal of the crowds and their desire that Jesus should do their will? But what John intends for us to see here is the exact opposite.

Notice that John doesn't say the disciples received Him into the boat (though they certainly did); he says that they were *willing to receive* Him into the boat.” He's emphasizing not so much the physical event of Jesus getting into the boat as he is the “psychological” or *heart* condition of the disciples that's being revealed in the actual historical event. Already this language of “receiving” Jesus or “receiving” His testimony is familiar to us from the first five chapters (cf. Jn. 12:48; 13:20; 17:8).

- John 1:11–12 — He came to his own, and his own people did not **receive him**. But to all who did **receive him**, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.
- John 1:16 — From his fullness we have all **received**, grace upon grace.
- John 3:11 — Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not **receive** our testimony.
- John 3:32–33 — [The Son] bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one **receives** his testimony. Whoever **receives** his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true.
- John 5:43 — I have come in my Father's name, and you do not **receive me**.

It's in the light of this receiving—or refusal to receive—that John wants us to see now the disciples' willingness* to receive Jesus into the boat. They cannot “make” Jesus what they want Him to be, but they can *receive* Him as *He* “offers” *Himself* to them. In verse 14, when the people were ready to come and take Him by force to make Him king, Jesus “**withdrew**” (*anachoreo*). He withdrew even from the disciples. Now, when the disciples are helpless, buffeted by the wind and the waves, the disciples see Jesus coming “**near**” (*engys*), *walking on the sea*, and they are *frightened*. But Jesus said to them, “*It is I; do not be afraid.*” “Then they were *willing to receive Him* into the boat...”

VI. John 6:21b — ...and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.

Remember what we read earlier in Psalm 107:

- Psalm 107:23–31 — Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters; they saw the deeds of the LORD, his wondrous works in the deep. For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven; they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their evil plight; they reeled and staggered like drunken men and were at their wits' end. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad that the waters were quiet, **and he brought them to their desired haven**. Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man!

Conclusion

Isn't it a wonderful thing that Jesus says to us, “Do not be afraid”? And isn't it even more wonderful when we understand that Jesus comes to us in the absoluteness of *His* lordship, as the one who walks on the sea, and *He* says to us, “*It is I, do not be afraid*”? We cannot “make” Jesus what we want Him to be, but we can *receive* Him as *He* “offers” *Himself* to us. When we do, by faith, we'll find without fail that He has already brought us—and that He will finally bring us—to our desired haven.

- Isaiah 46:3–4 — Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age **I am he [it is I; *ego eimi*]**, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.

Which is all the same as to say, “**It is I; do not be afraid.**”

* Gr. *thelo*; the point here is *willingness* as opposed to *unwillingness* (cf. Mat. 11:14; 26:15; Acts 25:9; 26:5; 2 Thess. 3:10) though an active *desire* is certainly implied and assumed (cf. Jn. 5:6; 7:44; 12:21; etc.).