

## Matthew 14 vs 22 to 33 The Call to Follow

### Introduction

How willing are you to trust people? What are the criteria you would use to make such choices? If, for example the individual in question was (a) your best friend or (b) a person you do business with regularly, or (c) someone who had let you down on more than one occasion, then the levels of trust would be significantly different between these three people. We cannot (and probably should not!) operate any other way with other people as it is part of the growing up process in life. One of the wonders of young children is their innocence in trusting people. Sadly they will have to learn as they get older that sometimes our trust in someone has been misplaced, as not everyone is as reliable as other people in keeping their promises or doing what they had committed to carrying out. Yet it is not just the 'other person' that has made wrong choices; most if not all of us at times has had occasions where we have let someone down or broken a prior commitment or made a wrong choice with our finances or in work decisions or with respect to some family obligation. Most of the time in daily life we operate on a kind of automatic pilot as the choices we make are routine and our expectations of people around us are consistently fulfilled in the choices they and we make in the ordinary everyday activities of life. However, what about our relationship with God? How are you getting on in your trust of the Lord and keeping your side of the relationship with Him? To what extent do you rely on Him to take care of you and watch over you in whatever life throws at us? Now we are expected to be sensible and wise about the decisions we make; but our reliance is supremely not on ourselves to cover all the issues that might arise, but on God who strengthens us. Yet it is so often only when we are feeling weak and vulnerable that we find out how deep is the level of our faith as Christians. Sometimes we are doing okay, but on occasions, we can drift along not depending on Him and when the storms of life come along we can seriously struggle to regain our focus and need to recognise that keeping close to the Lord is an essential priority for us as Christians. In Matthew 14:22-33 Simon Peter had a very practical test of his faith which he was confident of passing, but to his horror he failed miserably. Before we pass judgement on Peter –how many times would you or me react in exactly the same way if we were put to the test? What is most encouraging is that Jesus persevered with him enabling him, in time, to become one of the most significant Christian leaders in the Early Church. Yet it took years to get to that place. In exactly the same way God is at work in your life. The sign is up 'God at work –not finished yet'. In Romans 8:29 the apostle Paul wrote these words, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: *For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son.* In simple terms, before you were even born, God had a plan for your life. His intention was to change you over time so that by the time you are with Him in heaven you will be perfect in attitude, words and conduct, just like Jesus, His Son and our Saviour. When I look in my own life at how imperfect are my thoughts; how inadequate at times my words and how many times I would do certain things differently had I the opportunity to go back and try again! I am amazed that God perseveres with me. What is more, that He will not give up on any of His children who have trusted Him, through faith in Jesus, and continue to work in us until His goal is

accomplished. I don't know about you, but I find that very humbling! However, we take a step back to Simon Peter and the opportunity he had to demonstrate his faith in Jesus.

### **1. The presumption in his faith** (Matthew 14: 22-28)

(a) **The context of this story** (Matthew 14:22-23a) <sup>22</sup> *Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of Him to the other side, while He dismissed the crowd.* <sup>23</sup> *After He had dismissed them, He went up on a mountainside by Himself to pray...* What was the context in which this story unfolded? The day in question was an unforgettable one for any of the thousands of people who had been present. Jesus had been teaching for a large part of the day, something common with the rabbis of that time. No-one would have taken issue with that; and it was entirely a voluntary choice to both attend the meeting and stay for its duration. Up to this point nothing out of the ordinary had taken place. What happened next would mark out Jesus as the promised Messiah of Israel. He asked His disciples to organise a main meal for the vast crowd that had gathered. In an age of subsistence farming, where catering firms had not been invented and when wholesale grocers and supermarkets would wait another two millennia before becoming a regular feature of the western world, this was impossible for ordinary citizens to accomplish. Even the royalty of the day would have struggled to deliver such a spread on a daily basis. From the modest quantities of bread and fish available – an older child's daily portion! Jesus fed thousands of people with enough food for them to be fully satisfied with its quantity. The word miracle at times is over-used, but on this occasion no other description could suffice. Many of the Galilean peasants present grasped the point of the feast – to show who Jesus is – the one prophesied about in the Old Testament. (John 6:14-15 makes this very clear: *After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, 'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.'* <sup>15</sup> *Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make Him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by Himself.*) Knowing how volatile the situation might become Jesus took prompt action to diffuse any potential difficulties with the Jewish or Roman authorities -<sup>22</sup> *Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of Him to the other side, while He dismissed the crowd.* The atmosphere here is electric – not just equivalent to Mo Farah winning gold in the 5,000 and 10,000 metres in the London Olympics, but of completing a clean sweep of gold medals from the 100 metres to the marathon! At the same time He went in the opposite direction, alone to spend time with God to re-orientate Himself after such an extraordinary day. <sup>23</sup> *After He had dismissed them, He went up on a mountainside by Himself to pray.* This was the context of this test of Peter's faith.

(b) **Jesus' sovereignty over nature** (Matthew 14:23b-26) *Later that night, He was there alone,* <sup>24</sup> *and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.* <sup>25</sup> *Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake.* <sup>26</sup> *When the disciples saw Him walking on the lake, they were terrified. 'It's a ghost,' they said, and cried out in fear.* It was common for storms on that lake to begin with almost no warning and very quickly become a real danger to the small boats that fishermen used at that time. Even with the best boats of the present day fisherman still lose their lives and ships are sunk when storms catch them out. The major Bible commentators seem to suggest that the boat here has travelled at least halfway across the lake, but to be in that place in a storm is most vulnerable as there is a serious risk of drowning which ever way the crew members choose to row or sail their boat. On this occasion it appears that the disciples lives were not in danger, but their best efforts to command the craft's journey were causing little progress to be made and exhaustion would become a major factor after a few hours. The specific expression used by Matthew in verse 25 indicates that the time of this incident is between 3am and 6am. In a community where swimming was not taught, and therefore to be outside a boat in the water ensured a serious risk of death, the sight of someone on the water was unexpected to say the least. However,

not only is this stranger apparently walking on water, but also doing it in a storm when the waves would be bigger and more powerful. The disciples are convinced that their mental faculties are malfunctioning as they are seeing a ghost on the water. Possibly some of them were beginning to think that their time was up, even though the weather conditions were not quite that bad!

In this context the disciples have forgotten what had taken place less than twelve hours earlier; they had also forgotten about Jesus –or at least assumed He was unaware of what was happening to them. It is very possible if visibility was good that night, that Jesus had been able to observe their progress, or lack of it, at any point in time during the night, prior to His walk on the water to rescue them. We too at times have blind panics when we lose the place and make decisions that are rash and foolish. These disciples were acting as if their lives were not secure in God’s hands –and God’s people down the ages have also done exactly the same on occasions. Is that where you are at today? Do you need a fellow Christian to pray with you to help you regain a sense of perspective on your life circumstances? No situation is outside His control. Psalm 93:3-4 states: *The seas have lifted up, Lord, the seas have lifted up their voice; the seas have lifted up their pounding waves.* <sup>4</sup> *Mightier than the thunder of the great waters, **mightier than the breakers of the sea – the Lord on high is mighty.*** Do you, do I need to hear that message today?

(c) **Jesus’ reassuring words were an invitation to faith** (Matthew 14:27)

<sup>27</sup> *But Jesus immediately said to them: ‘Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.’* <sup>28</sup> *‘Lord, if it’s You,’ Peter replied, ‘tell me to come to You on the water.’* The occupants of the boat are fishermen who know that it is not normal for someone to walk on water. The ancient Egyptian symbol for something that is impossible was ‘two feet walking on water’. However, they hear and recognise the voice of Jesus. In literal words Jesus said in verse 27: *Be courageous I AM Don’t be afraid* This was more than a statement of the obvious; it was a declaration of his true identity as God in human flesh, identifying with the God of the Old Testament, by the choice of words used. In Isaiah 51:12-13 it states: *‘I, even I, am He who comforts you. Who are you that you fear mere mortals, human beings who are but grass,<sup>13</sup> that you forget the Lord your Maker, who stretches out the heavens and who lays the foundations of the earth...Interestingly further on in the same passage, in Isaiah 51:15, the prophet reports God as declaring: For I am the Lord your God, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar –the Lord Almighty is His name.* There are many situations in life outside our control, but not outside His. Listen to these words from Isaiah 43:2-3a from the New Living version: *When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you.* <sup>3</sup> *For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.*

2. **The invitation to his faith** (Matthew 14:28-29)

(a) **Peter’s challenge** (Matthew 14:28) <sup>28</sup> *‘Lord, if it’s You,’ Peter replied, ‘tell me to come to You on the water.* It is interesting that Peter’s words here to Jesus appear sincere and promising. The implications are that other disciples in the boat are doubting who it is that has spoken to them, but bold Peter is convinced it is Jesus and therefore all will be fine. At this stage all looks good and we are impressed with the depth of his faith and trust in the Lord. In your Christian life and mine there are days when we live and act by faith and demonstrate that in the choices we make and by our responses to the situations of life we are experiencing. We can even surprise ourselves that we have managed so well –but there is the danger if we think we have managed in our own strength and forgotten that it is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that we can be overcomers for God in the trials of life. Paul in the familiar words of Philippians 4:13 reminds us: *I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.* Our faith is a gift from God and must be exercised continually for us to continue living effectively

Christian lives. Hebrews chapter eleven gives us a series of examples of men and women who exercised faith in God in sometimes extraordinarily difficult circumstances and yet were triumphant over them. The principle is given in Hebrews 11:6: *And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.* Many years ago the circus tightrope walker Blondin had thrilled American audiences with his amazing feats on the high wire. In the summers of 1859 and 1860 crowds several thousand strong watched in amazement his performances at Niagara Falls. In the 1860s when the American civil war had drained any enthusiasm for public entertainment spectacles Blondin toured Europe and entertained vast audiences in public arenas. **[Picture of Blondin]** On one occasion after walking across Niagara Falls on his high wire he asked the audience if they thought he could carry someone across the falls with him. The vast majority affirmed that it was possible for him to accomplish even that feat. However, when it came time for volunteers this was another story altogether!

(b) **Peter's opportunity** (Matthew 14:29) <sup>29</sup> *'Come,' He said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came towards Jesus.* It is no different for you and me today. In principle it is easy to give the right answers as Christians. 'Yes, I believe God can...' –but the difficulty for us in practice can be a major struggle as our fears engulf our faith and we fail to gain the blessings which God may have planned to impart to us. We must give Peter the credit here for rising to the challenge. He stepped outside the boat and exercised the faith God had given him. He was not being reckless here. A probably apocryphal story was told some years ago of a man who was drowning in the water somewhere and cried out to God for help. A passerby threw a rubber ring to him attached to a rope, but he declined as God was going to help him. A lifeboat was launched to pick him up but again he declined to be taken on board; later much weaker a rescue helicopter winchman was lowered to pick him up and again he refused assistance and drowned. In heaven sometime later he asked God, I the story, why didn't you save me when I asked you for help? God replied: I did, three times and you declined it. Peter was not foolish his actions on this occasion were considered and appropriate. There will be times when we must exercise faith and trust God in situations where we cannot predict the outcome. The principle of our decision-making as believers is like that of Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego when threatened with death in a furnace if they would not deny their faith. Their response was recorded in Daniel 3:16-18: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, *'King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. <sup>17</sup> If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, **the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and He will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. <sup>18</sup> But even if He does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.'*** The principle was of doing everything sensible within their powers, but then stepping willingly into the unknown with God. Their vindication was more than they imagined possible and almost certainly more than they had dared pray for. In the coming week, months and years we will have opportunities 'to step outside the boat', both individually and collectively as a church. When these moments come the choice will be ours to make, as it was here with Peter.

### 3. **The weakness of his faith** (Matthew 14:29b-30)

[Peter] *walked on the water and came towards Jesus.*<sup>30</sup> *But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me!'* The awful weather conditions had been forgotten as Peter was focussed on Jesus. The weather conditions by the time of this encounter were really serious. The word translated: *tossed* or *buffeted* in verse 24 is translated elsewhere as *suffered* or *tortured* or *tormented*, for example, in Matthew 8:6, where a Roman centurion tells Jesus about his servant. *When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, asking for help.*

<sup>6</sup> ‘Lord,’ he said, ‘my servant lies at home paralysed, **suffering terribly.**’ In Matthew 8:29, the same word is used in the context of the words of some demon-possessed men who responded aggressively to Jesus. <sup>29</sup> ‘What do you want with us, Son of God?’ they shouted. ‘Have you come here **to torture** us before the appointed time?’ Or with reference to Lot, Abraham’s nephew, and how he hated the evil things that were taking place on a regular basis in the city of Sodom where he was living, in II Peter 2:8: *for that righteous man, living among them day after day, **was tormented** in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard.* So we must not imagine a gentle breeze, but weather conditions that distressed seasoned fishermen like these in this boat. Yet Peter began so well. Matthew 14:29b records; [Peter] *walked on the water and came towards Jesus.* This is important to underline here. If only the disciples in the boat and Peter on the water had grasped what was taking place while his eyes and focus were on Jesus. Actually because his eyes were fixed on Jesus he noticed neither the storm nor the miraculous walk. The miracle itself was secondary to the presence of Jesus. These two points are important for the Christian Church. Some professing Christians sadly don’t even consider getting out of the boat. Others will do that willingly, but so magnify that brother ...or sister... has walked on water that the focus on how great and wonderful Jesus is, is lost completely. In both these situations Jesus might have to walk on by as He is no longer central to these Christians. Hebrews 12:1-3 states: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, <sup>2</sup> **fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.** For the joy that was set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup> Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

If only we could stop there with Peter on the water and v29b; what about you and me today? How are we in our faith journey? Do we need to stop and renew our trust in the Lord Jesus? **But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’** (Matthew 14:30). I can identify with Peter here, and probably you can as well. Peter looks at the weather conditions and the water and quickly admits he doesn’t have the resources to overcome the difficulty starring him in the face. What was equally true was that the situation was no different when he stepped out of the boat! The difference is the presence of Jesus; the difference is the power of Jesus through the Holy Spirit; the difference is the dependence on Jesus by His weak fallible human follower, who relies on Him not his own natural and inadequate human resources. Do you need ‘to step out of the boat’ tonight? I don’t know in what context you might need to take this action, but if the Holy Spirit is speaking to you about some situation, please heed His prompting and don’t miss the blessing He has in store for you when you heed God’s call to you-whatever it may be. Thankfully that was not the end of the story. When Peter (or you and me) began to sink it was still in the context of the loving of care of a heavenly father for His child. God has not changed.

#### 4. **The encouragement for his faith** (Matthew 14:31-33)

<sup>31</sup> *Immediately Jesus reached out His hand and caught him. ‘You of little faith,’ He said, ‘why did you doubt?’<sup>32</sup> And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. <sup>33</sup> Then those who were in the boat worshipped Him, saying, ‘Truly You are the Son of God.’* Jesus could simply have spoken the word and calmed the storm, but He reached out a reassuring hand and caught Peter. Actually as there were two of them in the water in the midst of a storm this physical contact from another human being in itself ought not to have been sufficient to elicit such a response. However, Peter recaptures his faith and trust in Jesus and the situation is quickly resolved. It becomes a detail of the story, no longer a central feature, the fact that the storm has now ceased. With Jesus in the boat the disciples would have been confident that somehow they would make it to shore but the storm was simply here an opportunity for them to exercise

faith in the Lord. Jesus rescued Peter, but gave him and his colleagues a word on which to ponder. *'You of little faith,' He said, 'why did you doubt?'*<sup>32</sup> *And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down.* <sup>33</sup> *Then those who were in the boat worshipped Him, saying, 'Truly You are the Son of God (Matthew 14:31b-33).'* Later in John 14:12, after the resurrection, in a similar faith challenge He said to His disciples: *Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.* This is a marvellous story for us to read, rejoice in and to reflect on for its implications for our lives individually and collectively in the coming days. God has not changed and will not do so. The issue is always about us and how we are exercising faith in Him. To Him be all the praise and glory, Amen.