



Sunday School Lesson
Scripture Text
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Peter, Learning About Jesus



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This lesson begins a five part study in the *Life Ventures* Sunday School series on the stated theme of "Peter's Principles for Successful Living." Not having taught from this lesson series for quite some time, I had forgotten how desperately weak and misleading this shallow proof-texting approach to scripture can be, which is being utilized by the SBC Life-Way division these days. The net effect is to trivialize the importance of scripture and to impose a previously developed thought structure down onto God's Word. This gets awfully close to the "traditions of men" that Jesus condemned the Pharisees about in [Mark 7:8](#) (NRSV): "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." They sought intensely to base everything on the Old Testament scripture, especially the Law and the Prophets sections, but their approach to interpreting the scripture was flawed to the extreme. Not too much unlike what is being done in the Sunday School lesson quarterly!

No rhyme or reason appears for the selection of the scripture texts for all of these five lessons. Of the [156 times](#) that Peter's name shows up in the New Testament, less than a dozen texts are used in all five lessons. For topical Bible study to be legitimate, it must be inclusive of the topic being studied, not a random sample of a very small portion of the available texts. The theme title in the lesson quarterly implies a theology of Peter kind of study, but the selected topics and scripture passages miserably fail to address the belief system set forth in the two letters of Peter found in the New Testament, which should serve as the foundation for any theologically oriented study of Peter's thought. For a helpful, although somewhat limited, study of this see the internet listing for [First Peter](#) and [Second Peter](#) in the free *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. The *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* has a better presentation of these issues, but is available on the internet only through subscription in the Cokesbury [iPreach](#) materials.

All of this to say that our study will focus on one of the suggested passages, [Matt. 14:22-33](#) along with its parallels in [Mark 6:45-52](#) and [John 6:15-21](#), as a character study of one segment of Peter's life. In this episode, usually entitled "Walking on Water," Peter learned much about himself and about Jesus. What he discovered can be of significant help to us as we attempt to follow the Lord in our world.

I. Context

As is true with every scripture passage, the establishment of both the historical and literary setting of the passage being studied is critical to correct understanding of the content of the passage. We will first give some attention to these two concerns that will lay a foundation for examining the content of the verses in the passage.

a. Historical

The historical context for [Matt. 14:22-33](#) has both external and internal aspects. The external history has to do with the writing of the Gospel of Matthew and asks the typical reporter questions: Who wrote

this? When was this written? Where was this written? To whom was this written? Why was this written? The internal history treats time and place concerns that arise from inside the scripture passage itself. Thus, the more we understand about these two historical aspects of the text, the more likely we can make legitimate sense of what the text is saying. Without this awareness, we are almost certainly doomed to finding things in the text that don't exist there, as well as missing important concepts that do exist in the scripture text. Something Bible scholars call "eisogesis" (i.e., reading outside preconceived meaning into the text). Legitimate Bible study that honors God's Word as authoritative, inspired scripture always seeks to listen to what the scripture text is saying in its original historical setting (called "exegesis", i.e., reading out of the text).

The *external history* of our passage has to do the early church tradition that the apostle Matthew was responsible for the composition of the first Gospel document in our New Testament. In the various streams of early church tradition from about 100 to 600 AD, Matthew is most often associated with the first gospel. The portrait of this individual is summarized helpfully in the old and somewhat outdated [Easton's Bible Dictionary](#) (online) as:

gift of God, a common Jewish name after the Exile. He was the son of Alphaeus, and was a publican or tax-gatherer at Capernaum. On one occasion Jesus, coming up from the side of the lake, passed the custom-house where Matthew was seated, and said to him, "Follow me." Matthew arose and followed him, and became his disciple (Matthew 9:9). Formerly the name by which he was known was Levi (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27); he now changed it, possibly in grateful memory of his call, to Matthew. The same day on which Jesus called him he made a "great feast" (Luke 5:29), a farewell feast, to which he invited Jesus and his disciples, and probably also many of old associates. He was afterwards selected as one of the twelve (6:15). His name does not occur again in the Gospel history except in the lists of the apostles. The last notice of him is in Acts 1:13. The time and manner of his death are unknown.

The first gospel itself carries no internal identification of author etc. Thus we start with an assessment of the traditions of post-apostolic Christianity regarding such issues. In general, this gospel is understood to have been written at least in the late 60s of the first Christian century, and possibly later. Most likely the place of writing was Damascus or Antioch because of some of the church traditions. Modern scholars have concluded for the most part that the Christian community being addressed by this gospel document is a dominately, if not exclusively, Jewish Christian community that had come under intense pressure during the first Jewish war of 66-70 AD to abandon its Christian commitment and "come back home" to the synagogue and their traditional religious heritage in Judaism as an act of patriotism to help save the Jewish nation from destruction by the Romans. The gospel document was then written to discourage this by demonstration that Jesus is the true fulfillment of what God had done beginning with Abraham and Moses. Thus, for one to be in God's will as a Jew meant to be a follower of Jesus.

Although elements of this scenario are difficult to prove beyond reasonable questioning, the essence of it seems to be the most likely historical situation for the writing of the gospel document.

The *internal history* of 14:22-33 should now be addressed. This has to do, in our passage, with concerns like where did this narrative take place? When



did it occur? Especially in Jesus' ministry? Three gospels describe this single episode of Peter walking on the water out to Jesus: Matt. 14:22-33; Mark 6:45-52 and John 6:15-21. An examination of the time and place references in all three passages becomes the source for answering these questions of internal history. Often a study tool such as a Gospel Synopsis becomes a helpful tool for this kind of study of the four gospels. Many different print versions exist, but a very helpful one on the internet is "The Five Gospel Parallels" by John. H. Marshall at <http://www.utoronto.ca/religion/synopsis/>. Such a tool will list the parallel texts side by side thus enabling quick and easy comparison of the wording of each gospel account with the others. All three gospel sources indicate that the disciples were in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. The feeding of the 5,000 had just taken place near Bethsaida on the northeast side of the sea (see. Mt. 14:13-21; Mk. 6:32-44; Lk. 9:10b-17; Jn. 6:1-15). The disciples were instructed by Jesus to get in a boat and cross back over to the "other side" (Mt. 14:22). Matthew doesn't identify where this was, although Mark says it was Bethsaida (Mk. 6:45), while John says it was Capernaum (Jn. 6:16). All three gospels indicate that the episode



Dusk over the Sea of Galilee from Kursi

happened during nighttime, and that a storm was underway on the sea, creating high waves that threatened to sink the boat. Matthew (14:25) and Mark (6:48) suggest that the event happened during the "fourth

watch of the night” (τετάρτην φυλακὴν τῆς νυκτὸς), which the New Living Translation correctly renders as “about three o’clock in the morning.” In ancient time calculation the fourth watch of the night referred to the time frame from about 3 to 6 a.m. Matthew (14:24) also adds the detail locating the boat quite some distance from the shore (“but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land,”), while Mark (6:47) simply says “the boat was out on the sea.” John (6:19) indicates that when they saw Jesus they “had rowed about three or four miles” (ἐληλακότες ὡς σταδίους εἴκοσι πέντε ἢ τριάκοντα).

When putting all this together it becomes clear the approximate time and location was in the northern part of the Sea of Galilee some distance from a shoreline and at least by three or four o’clock in the morning. The remaining question of when in Jesus’ public ministry did this event take place is answered by looking at the sequence of events in each of the gospel accounts. This can be answered quickly by checking my [Life of Christ](#) page at Cranfordville.com for the listing of this text in Matthew. Such a check reveals that the feeding of the 5,000 begins the final segment of Jesus’ public ministry in northern Palestine and is immediately followed by this walking on water miracle narrative in three of the four gospels. This would place the event most likely in late 29 or early 30 AD.

b. Literary

The literary issues of 14:22-33 has to do with a couple of items. What kind of writing are these verses? At what point in the Matthean gospel is this episode placed by the writer?

The first matter has to do with literary genre, i.e., the literary form of the passage. In the broad sense, this passage is a part of a gospel writing. Unlike the history in Acts, the letters of Paul and other apostles, and the book of Revelation--all of which were written in literary forms quite common in the ancient world--the gospel literary form did not have any clear antecedents. It bears some similarity to ancient history (ἱστορία), but is very different from it in most respects. Additionally, the gospel form has elements in common with ancient biography (βίος), which is very different from modern biography. Yet, the gospel form has significant differences from ancient biography. One of these sharp distinctions has to do with the purpose behind both kinds of writings. Ancient biography was to applaud the significant accomplishments of a heroic figure in either Roman or Greek history. But as Luke 1:4 and John 20:31 make very clear, the gospels were written expressly to encourage faith in Jesus as the Son of God. That doesn’t mean that they are unhistorical, but it does mean that we make a big mistake to assume Matthew’s gospel is a biography of Jesus either in the modern or ancient sense of the term. Historical concerns were not at the top of the list in the writing of the gospel accounts; belief in Jesus was. This helps explain the lack of closely cohesive narrative details especially in regard to time and place references when two or more gospel writers are describing the same event. These individualized details are included by each gospel writer following his own purpose and/or sources of information. For example the Bethsaida and Capernaum tension between Mark and John in our pericope. The lack of clarity at this point only allows us to understand the event in the northern part of this twelve mile plus long sea. It’s not clear which direction the disciples were headed, although it seems as though they were going westward. John and Matthew point to that direction, but Mark points to a southward direction.

In the narrow sense of the term, genre has to do with identifiable repetitive patterns of narration reflecting an established literary form. Our passage has repetitive traits identifying it as a [nature miracle](#), in terms of these kinds of miracle narratives that were quite common in ancient literature. This type of narrative depicts the central figure doing something demonstrating his power over the natural order of creation. Usually this extraordinary power is attributed to the divine, and not to above average human capabilities. The miracles of Jesus in the four gospels are narratives affirming him to be the divine Son of God and thus what he says by way of teaching possesses God’s stamp of approval and should be carefully heeded by its hearers.

This walking on water miracle in our study demonstrates Jesus’ ability to override the natural forces of gravity that ordinarily would have caused an individual to sink and possibly drown. The depth of the Sea of Galilee ranges from about eighty to an hundred sixty feet. The location of the boat some distance from the shore means that the water around the boat was very deep. Thus, in no possible way did Jesus merely walk on rocks located just below the surface of the water while getting out to the boat. Some extraordinary

divine power was expressed in his ability to walk out to the boat from the shore. With Matthew's exclusive insertion of Peter's walking out to Jesus from the boat, this gospel writer makes the point that this divine power can be shared with others when the circumstances are right. This power of God can flow from Jesus to the person of sufficient faith.

II. Message

Another literary aspect has to do with the organization of ideas inside the passage. In this case the general structure is relatively easy to identify, since ancient miracle narratives uniformly revolved around the depiction of the need for the miracle, the occurrence of the miracle, and the impact of the miracle. In Matthew this divides the text into the following segments: Need, vv. 22-24; Miracle (with Peter insertion), vv. 25-31; Impact, vv. 32-33.

Since we're studying Matthew's account primarily, we will follow his presentation, and insert the parallels from Mark and John as they occur. The New Revised Standard Version will be the English translation used.

a. Danger on the sea, vv. 22-24

Matt. 14:22-24

22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.

Mark. 6:45-47

45 Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. 46 After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray. 47 When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land.

John 6:15-18

15 When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. 16 When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, 17 got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. 18 The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing.

Comments:

A close reading of these three narratives highlights the absence of an emphasis upon the danger faced by the disciples in the boat in Mark's account. But John and especially Matthew emphasize this aspect. All three gospel writers stress the dismissal of the crowd from the feeding miracle, the disciples' departure in the boat, and Jesus going up into the mountain alone. Mark emphasizes the purpose of the trip into the mountain by Jesus: to pray. Matthew, who in all likelihood used Mark as one of his sources, stresses the same point. John doesn't mention prayer, but stresses the actions of the crowds to forcibly make Jesus their king on their terms of messianic expectation as a motivating factor for Jesus' withdrawal to the mountain. He needed to reaffirm his mission from the Heavenly Father and find renewal from the time alone. All three gospel writers stress the distance between Jesus and his disciples, each in their own way (Mt. vv. 23b-24; Mk. v. 47; Jn. v. 15). Both Mark and Matthew emphasize that the disciples' departure was done with considerable demand by Jesus (εὐθέως ἠνάγκασεν τοὺς μαθητὰς ἐμβῆναι εἰς τὸ πλοῖον...; "Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat..."). The Greek verb clearly indicates that they went against their wills and could well be translated as "compelled them," because Jesus demanded that they go. Matthew and Mark have virtually identical wording at this point, as is true for most of the common material between



these two gospels. John (vv. 16-17) doesn't emphasize this aspect at all in his narrative.

In serious Bible study, the next step of analysis is the question of connections to our world. Do these verses contain spiritual ideas that have relevance to situations in contemporary Christian experience? Asking these questions has been foundational since the beginning of New Testament interpretation. In the centuries following the era of Jesus and the apostles, the tendency was to allegorize the biblical texts. Thus, the boat represented the church, the storm symbolized persecution of the church, the disciples were all true Christians etc. For nearly four hundred years now, such methods of interpretation have increasingly show to be severely misguided and leading to wrong headed understanding more often than not.

In more substantive ways we need to ask the question of connectivity. These beginning verses underscore a situation that created the need for the presence and power of Jesus to deliver the disciples from potential harm. The disciples, in their efforts to row the five or six miles across the sea, were attempting to carry out Jesus' instructions but encountered serious obstacles to being able to do that successfully. In the meanwhile, Jesus was spending time alone with the Heavenly Father in a renewing and reaffirming experience, prompted in part by the misunderstanding of the significance of the miraculous feeding of the large crowds. As John narrates this episode, they saw Jesus' action as providing evidence of messianic power to feed the armies of liberation that the promised Son of God would be able to do when he returned to throw out the Romans and reestablish the Jewish nation. For Jesus it was another temptation from Satan to turn aside from the Father's mission just as he had experienced in the forty day wilderness temptations from the Devil at the beginning of his public ministry. Thus Jesus needed, through prayer with the Heavenly Father, to reaffirm his mission of being a suffering servant Messiah.

Herein lies a couple of possible connections to our religious experience today. Do we ever come up against obstacles in trying to carry out Jesus' instructions? Certainly, if we have any kind of commitment to the Lord! We face them daily. What then do these beginning verses teach us then? For one thing, that we share something in common with those initial disciples of our Lord. Their experience is our experience in many ways. The severe experience of the dangerous storm typifies severe experiences that we sometimes encounter -- experiences that we have absolutely no control over and that leave us completely at the mercy of powers far greater than ourselves.

Another lesson from these initial verses is from the example of Jesus in solitary prayer on the mountain. Our Lord needed to spend time alone with the Heavenly Father in prayer for reaffirmation and renewal. Luke asserts that such was a regular pattern during Jesus' earthly ministry, e.g., Lk. 5:16; 9:18; 9:28-29; 11:1. Through that communion with God Jesus found needed resources to faithfully carry out God's assignment. If He needed that, how much more do we need it! Vibrant, alive spiritual experience can't be conjured up by pep rally type public worship services. As crucial as public worship is to our spiritual health, times of solitary communion with God are just as critical to our well-being. Jesus demonstrates that in these verses with dramatic fashion. This is perhaps one of the larger challenges facing us as believers in American culture. We tend to live such fast paced, crammed full daily schedules that there's little time to get alone for reflection and meditation. But even though challenging, each of us needs to work at blocking off such times as often as possible. Our spiritual health will benefit significantly from such times.

b. Jesus comes to the rescue, vv. 25-31

Matt. 14:25-31

25 And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." 28 Peter

Mark. 6:48-50

48 When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. 49 But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; 50 for they all saw him and

John 6:19-20

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 terrified. 20 But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid."

answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." 29 He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Comments:

This section describes the actual miracle, although in rather indirect terms. Most of the focus is on Jesus' walking across the sea and the disciples initial reaction to seeing him. His words of reassurance become the climatic point of this section of biblical narrative.

Even a causal reading of these three texts also reveals a very distinctive aspect found only in Matthew's account: that of Peter walking out to Jesus on the water. This is a distinctive to the Matthean gospel, and surfaces as the first of five such narratives where Matthew exclusively asserts that Peter received special treatment from Jesus: cf. [14:28-31](#); [15:5](#); [16:13-23](#); [17:24-27](#), and [18:21](#), all of which come in chapters fourteen through eighteen of the first gospel. Careful study of these passages reveals that Peter emerges not just as a leader of the Twelve, but as an individual capable of both failure and accomplishment. This mixed picture of him is certainly present in our passage. These narratives make us want to both boo and cheer him. But they also portray Peter in his full humanness with which we can readily identify, as fellow believers serving the same Lord.

Let's look first at the common material across the three gospel accounts (Mt. 14:25-27; Mk. 6:48-50; Jn. 6:19-20), and then examine the distinctive Matthean Petrine material (Mt. 14:28-31).

All three underscore the trouble the disciples were having in the boat out on the sea of Galilee. Early in the morning, sometime between 3 and 6 am (the fourth watch according to Roman calculation of nighttime from sundown to sunup into four segments of time), Jesus came walking across the sea toward the boat. John (6:19) indicates they had rowed some 25 or 30 stadia across the sea when Jesus came to them. A Roman στάδιον was appx. 607 feet. Thus the NRSV correctly renders this in American miles calculation as "three or four miles," which was about three fourths of the way across the Sea of Galilee.

Mark adds the interesting insight (v.48b), "[He intended to pass them by.](#)" The Markan statement is curious in most English expressions because the beginning of verse 48 indicates that Jesus' awareness of their trouble in the storm was what prompted him to go out to them. Perhaps, Mark intentionally used the OT language of divine appearance (epiphany), such as Job 9:8, 11 ("[8 who alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the Sea](#); [9 who made the Bear and Orion, the Pleiades and the chambers of the south](#); [10 who does great things beyond understanding, and marvelous things without number](#). [11 Look, he passes by me, and I do not see him; he moves on, but I do not perceive him.](#)"). If correct, then Mark is identifying Jesus' appearance to the disciples in the OT language of God appearing to individuals at critical times in the life. For more details see William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, in the New International Commentary on the New Testament, pp. 235-237.

Both Matthew and John omit this and instead focus on Jesus coming to the disciples in the boat. When he came close to the boat, the disciples saw him and it scared them spitless! The long Hebrew tradition was to be fearful of traveling on large bodies of water, especially the Mediterranean Sea. [Psalm 69](#) and [Jonah](#) are but two examples of many such Jewish traditions where drowning and rescue by God are important themes. When the disciples spot this figure coming across the water toward them, they assume it is something from the spirit world (Greek *πάντασμα* for 'apparition' from the realm of the dead rather than the more common *πνεῦμα* for spirit or ghost) coming to get them. Their apprehension, already at a high

level because of increasing inability to cope with the dangerous storm, then shoots through the ceiling at the thought that evil powers were also closing in on them. Jesus then offers words of identification and comfort (Mt. 14:27, NRSV): "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid" (Θαρσεῖτε, ἐγὼ εἰμι· μὴ φοβεῖσθε). The middle part of this "it is I" (ἐγὼ εἰμι) is the language of God's self-identification beginning with [Exod 3:14](#). Quite clearly, all three gospel writers portray this as a divine appearance via Jesus' action of walking on the water. As Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, in the Sacra Pagina commentary series (p. 227) says, "The heart of Matt. 14:22-36 is an epiphany, that is, the manifestation of Jesus as doing what God does (walking on the sea and rescuing those in danger of drowning) and identifying himself in the way God speaks of himself ('I am he')."

At this point Matthew inserts his special Peter narrative into the story (vv. 28-31), not found in either of the other accounts. Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, volume 22 in the New American Commentary (p. 235) has a helpful summation of these verses: "In this uniquely Matthean section, Peter asks for the power to imitate Jesus' miracle." This along the lines of the earlier commissioning of Jesus in [Mt. 10:1ff.](#) of the Twelve to duplicate his ministry to others. Peter starts out to Jesus from the boat but his faith slips and he has to be rescued by Jesus from drowning. Don Carson, "Matthew," in the *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (p. 344) has a helpful insight: "It was not that he lost faith in himself (so Schniewind), but that his faith in Jesus, strong enough to get him out of the boat and walking on the water, was not strong enough to stand up to the storm. Therefore Jesus calls him a man 'of little faith'."

What can we learn from these verses that will help us serve Christ better? The central point of these verses historically is that when Jesus makes an appearance God has revealed Himself. Although that may be taken for granted by most believers today, it nonetheless remains a major point. To see Jesus is to see the Father. The divinity of Jesus is foundational; he indeed is the Son of God. To deny or diminish this spiritual truth is to undermine the foundation for legitimate Christian belief. Additionally, where the divine presence occurs one finds rescue and safety. No power, however dark and threatening it may seem, is greater than God's power. Such talk as one hears occasionally these days even among evangelical Christians of the limited power of God is sheer nonsense and heresy. Scripture consistently denies such an idea. But that power has to be experienced, more than rationally understood. God exercises a sovereignty about showing it in our world, to be sure. Our challenge is to reach out to God through Jesus in a confidence in the superiority of his power over every foe. Peter illustrates this dramatically here. All this is wrapped up in a faith response to the divine presence. Additionally, these verses remind us of the caring concern of Jesus especially for his own people. Mark especially highlights the motivation of Jesus going out to the disciples in order to rescue them. That Jesus continues to care for his own people we must never forget.

c. Jesus is in control, vv. 32-33

Matt. 14:32-33

32 When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Mark. 6:51-52

51 Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, 52 for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

John 6:21

21 Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

Comments:

This third segment (effects of the miracle) underscores two items in Matthew and Mark especially: (1) the wind stopped blowing when Jesus got into the boat, and (2) the disciples were amazed at Jesus and what they witnessed. John highlights these items in his own distinctive way, especially the first point. The Markan and Matthean narratives emphasize that the divine power of Jesus took effect as he got into the boat. That is, the storm ceased immediately. Mark puts it simply, "they were utterly astounded" (λίαν ἐκ περισσοῦ ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ἐξίσταντο). Matthew picked up on this part of Mark's statement and rephrases it as "those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God'" (οἱ δὲ ἐν τῷ πλοίῳ προσεκύνησαν αὐτῷ

λέγοντες· ἀληθῶς θεοῦ υἱὸς εἶ). John sort of gets at this idea with his “Then they wanted to take him into the boat” (οὖν λαβεῖν αὐτὸν εἰς τὸ πλοῖον). The question naturally arises concerning the depth of understanding by the disciples at this stage of their following Jesus. In Matthew’s telling of the story of Jesus, this is the first time the disciples have addressed Jesus by this title, Son of God (cf. 16:16; 26:63; 27:40, 43, 54). In a somewhat similar earlier episode where Jesus calmed the waters of a storm (Mt. 8:23-27), the reaction of the disciples was to pose a question, “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?” (NRSV). Now they acknowledge him as “Son of God” for the first time.

Does this mean they now possessed a full blown understanding of who Jesus was? It’s very unlikely, for several reasons. Too many narratives of events after this one are found that cast the disciples in a negative light struggling to understand who Jesus was, including Matthew’s gospel. Also, Mark’s concluding statement in this narrative reflects his belief that they did not really grasp who Jesus really was: “for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened” (NRSV; οὐ γὰρ συνῆκαν ἐπὶ τοῖς ἄρτοις, ἀλλ’ ἦν αὐτῶν ἡ καρδία πεπωρωμένη). Even in the final scene of Matthew’s story, uncertainty is still present among these men as Matthew says in 28:17 “When they saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted.” Don Carson is probably correct in his observation (“Matthew,” Expositor’s Bible Commentary, p. 345), “Probably they used the title in a messianic way, but still with superficial comprehension.” Their faith was a developing faith deepened and strengthened by a variety of experiences.

Now the question about connections. Can we learn something helpful from these final verses of this episode? I believe we can learn several important lessons. One central point is the example of their response to realizing the presence of Almighty God in the action of Jesus. Mark graphically describes it in ancient Greek categories of amazement, that is, their minds momentarily stood disconnected from their bodies. Matthew interprets this as bowing the knee in reverent worship. John depicts eagerness to get close to Jesus. The almost universal pattern in both the Old and New Testaments to a dramatic appearance of God is that the humans present are overwhelmed by the awesomeness of God. There is none of the causal “Man upstairs” kind of language in these experiences. God’s power and might is seen more in its fullness and it dumbfounds the humans. The Bible underscores the importance of these occasional experiences with God. Spiritual healthiness always keeps a vision of the divine as overwhelmingly powerful as a part of its understanding of God. To be sure, we cannot create such experiences, for God alone controls when and how He will reveal himself this way to his people. But each of us needs these encounters on occasion in order to become spiritually mature believers.

Another lesson is that such overpowering encounters with God need not to be thoroughly understood or comprehended. And they are not based upon a perfect faith from believers. The confession of the disciples here was not done with the same level of insight that it would have later on. As Mark says, hardness of heart was still present in that boat in the midst of awestrickenness. They had not yet put everything together, to use the literal meaning of Mark’s verb συνῆκαν (*synekan*, related to the English word ‘synthesize’). That is, the event and its significance hadn’t yet connected up in their minds.

There is encouragement here, as Eduard Schweizer in *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* in *Das Neue Testament Deutsch* commentary series (p. 211) declares, “Thus Jesus’ call to his successors, his exhortation to believers, his delivering help in spite of his doubting and small faithed disciples is the decisive issue.”* We always come in crisis moments into God’s presence with a mixture of imperfect faith mingled with some uncertainty and doubt. God comes to us, and His presence is the decisive difference between rescue and ruin. Peter learned to keep his eyes focused on Jesus, and not on the storm surging around him. We would do well to follow his example.

*“So ist Jesu Ruf in die Nachfolge, seine Zuspruch an den Glauben, sein rettendes helfen gegenüber dem Versagen seiner zweifelnden und kleingläubigen Jünger das Entscheidende.” (English translation mine)