

## THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

### Lesson 52, Chapter 14 Continued

Keep your Bibles open and handy as we're going to do much reading today.

The beginning of Matthew chapter 14 was covered in the previous lesson. It is the story of the execution of John the Baptist. The request for his beheading came during a lavish birthday party for Herod Antipas, at the behest of Herod's wife Herodias. The marriage of Herodias to Herod was recent, and John spoke out against it, calling it "unlawful". Or in the Jewish context of the day, the union was illicit and it broke the Law of Moses. The issue was that Herodias was actually married to Herod Antipas' brother Herod Philip. But for reasons unexplained, Antipas stole her away from his brother. Why would Herod or Herodias care what the strange commoner, John the Baptist, had to say about it? First it was because Herod pretended to be a Jew who followed the Jewish religion; neither claim was true. This false claim originated with his father, Herod the Great, when he ruled and also pretended the same things. So, for John to publicly denounce Herod as breaking the Torah regarding marriage (and indeed it did violate the Law of Moses) created an uncomfortable conundrum for Antipas, and it apparently greatly bothered and angered his wife Herodias.

All throughout Hebrew history it seems that Israel's kings...legitimate or not... regularly saw themselves as above the Law of Moses. And certainly since the King sat atop Israel's justice system as the ultimate judge and jury, he would never indict himself for wrongdoing (just think about all the wrongs David did and he never faced the Torah justice system). Herod was concerned because John the Baptist had a substantial following and thus he had influence. Herod feared an uprising; not so much that he couldn't eventually put it down, but because Rome made it the number one priority among the many appointed rulers within

their empire to keep the peace. If the peace was broken, then the ruler was usually seen as at fault.

In the end, Herodias used her lovely young daughter to entice Herod into offering her anything she wanted from him. He vowed before his birthday party guests (all dignitaries of course) that he would give this young beauty up to half his kingdom (this was an expression, not something to be taken literally) for pleasing him and his guests by performing a seductive dance. Her mother told her to ask Antipas for John's head and not really wanting to, he obliged her because otherwise he risked losing face before his guests if he didn't. The order was given and carried out immediately.

Jesus heard about John's death through some of John's followers and He reacted by departing in a boat to somewhere secluded to have time to mourn, pray, and contemplate what this might mean for Himself. He was, after all, in the territory that Herod Antipas controlled and Herod had made a connection between John the Baptist and Jesus... although it was a rather irrational one. But the Sea of Galilee isn't all that big so a large crowd saw where Yeshua seemed to be going and followed on foot around the lake in hopes of catching up with Him so He would perform His healing miracles on them. Because there were so many, and it was getting near dark, Yeshua's disciples (who were late arrivals to the gathering) said that the crowd should be dispersed so they could go to some local villages to purchase food for their evening meal. Yeshua told them no; the disciples were to feed them.

The disciples were astonished at this command since about 10,000 men, women and children were present and the only food the disciples had available was what they had brought for themselves: 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. Jesus blessed the food, and told the disciples to start distributing it. Miraculously, it fed the entire crowd with baskets left over.

Let's pick up at Matthew 14 verse 22 and find out what happened next.

### **RE-READ MATTHEW 14:22 - end**

The story of Yeshua walking on the water is also told in the Gospels of Mark and John. While each is similar, each also adds their own flavor, and some might say there are disparities of a factual nature among them. I want to remind you that the Matthew who is the author of this Gospel is not Matthew Levi, one of the

original 12. This is a different Matthew and so, like the other Gospel writers, he wasn't present as eyewitness to the events that are being spoken about. John is the exception as he, indeed, was present to hear Yeshua speak in person. But by no means does that mean that he was present for everything he recorded in his Gospel. Rather these Gospel writers took their accounts from a combination of eyewitnesses and researching earlier recorded accounts that were known. Modern scholars constantly debate over where these accounts might have come from, and who originally wrote them. No one knows. All scholars can do is guess, so we won't go there.

Before we dissect this story, lets read the accounts in both Mark and John to supplement the one in Matthew.

Turn your Bibles to Mark chapter 6.

### **READ MARK 6: 45 - 56**

Now turn to John chapter 6.

### **READ JOHN 6:14 - 27**

When we see these accounts side by side by side, we immediately notice the differences. Some of the variations have to do with what parts of the event each Gospel writer includes. It's not that one is accurate (or most accurate) and the others are less accurate. It's for the same reason that honest journalists will interview several people who witnessed, or have knowledge, of some event because each will perceive it slightly differently. And each will also recall some elements of the happening while not remembering them all. Therefore by stitching the various accounts together a person can obtain a more complete story.

But we also at times see the **conclusions** that each Gospel writer drew from what they learned concerning an event they had investigated, and therefore what they felt the readers should know. Because each writer wrote his Gospel anywhere from about 30 years to about 60 years after the events had transpired then history played out a bit further and they had a little different perspective than the people who were there. After all; the Gospel writers wrote decades after Christ's death, burial, and resurrection and the Jesus movement had grown substantially (something that at the time of these events we're reading about

hadn't yet occurred). So how the people that formed the crowds thought about Jesus and His words and His miracles as they experienced them could be quite different than how the Gospel writers might have thought about them since the passage of time gave these writers more information.

So, using Matthew's Gospel as our primary source, we see that at the end of the day after the multitudes were fed, the disciples got into a boat and headed back across the Lake to the area they resided while Yeshua stayed behind to dismiss the crowd. Why it was set up that way logistically that Jesus alone sent the crowds away we're not told. However Matthew makes it clear that the solitude Jesus had sought in the first place by coming to this place, and didn't get, He again pursued. Christ went up into the hills to be alone and pray. Soon night fell and He was by Himself at the same time the boat with the disciples in it was slowly moving across the Sea of Galilee. It seems that a storm had erupted (something that happens with some regularity at the Lake) and the winds were howling. They were apparently heading into the wind and couldn't make any progress. The CJB says that the boat was several miles away but that is not the best translation. Rather the distance measure was recorded in the Roman stadia. A stadia is about 200 yards. Since the lake wasn't anymore than perhaps 5 miles across, they were likely not much more than a couple of miles from the shore they had departed from; however they were stymied and couldn't get across the body of water because of the strong wind.

The disciples' destination, according to Mark, was Bethsaida. Matthew doesn't tell us their intended destination so much as where they actually wound up: Gennesaret (the CJB says Ginosar, but I'll explain that in a minute). John says they were heading **towards** Capernaum but not necessarily **to** Capernaum. Why don't the destinations agree? It is likely because all these places were pretty near one another; they were all located at the north and northwest part of the Sea of Galilee. I suspect that the Gospel writers knew only generalities about where it was exactly along the western side of the Lake that the disciples were going and so assumed the village's name according to about where on the Lake it was located. And they all concluded differently.

The ancient village of Gennesaret is the modern day Ginosar. Today a Kibbutz is located there along with a wonderful hotel and an interesting museum. I've billeted a number of tour groups in the Nof Ginosar Hotel. The museum there is famous for their display of the Jesus Boat (as its called). The boat is a typical fishing boat from the 1<sup>st</sup> century that was discovered in 1986 buried in the mud

and exposed due to a drought and the receding shore line. No one claims that this is the actual boat that Jesus was in, but it is the real deal of what a Galilean fishing boat looked like in that day. It is remarkably well preserved and well worth seeing because when we read in the Bible about storms erupting on the Sea of Galilee (like with our story of Yeshua walking on the water) it is easy to understand why the occupants of a boat like that would get panicky. Those vessels are quite small and could be easily swamped or overturned in a storm.

Just above Ginosar along the lakeshore is Capernaum; the northernmost village mentioned in our story is Bethsaida. The main thing for us to understand is that the disciples departed from somewhere on the east side of the Sea of Galilee and were headed toward the west side.

Apparently they were battling against the waves and headwind all night long because we're told that it was during the 4<sup>th</sup> watch that Yeshua took a little walk across those raging waters towards those exhausted and frightened boat occupants. The 4<sup>th</sup> watch is what we would call 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. How did Jesus know they were in trouble? Mark says that He **saw** that they were having trouble rowing the boat. Matthew doesn't explain it and neither does John. The Greek word Mark uses for what alerted Yeshua is **eido**, which is usually translated as see. However it can mean "see" in the sense of something that is visual and in our eyesight or in the sense of our knowing something. It is hard to imagine how Jesus could, in the dark of the night during a violent storm, spot a small fishing boat bobbing around a mile or two offshore with several very worried and wet folks aboard. Rather, the true beginning of this miracle is that He knew where the boat was and that it was floundering and that His disciples needed to be rescued.

It's the next part of the miracle that has always mesmerized Christians. Yeshua simply walked on top of the water towards the boat in order to get to them. We're told that when the disciples saw Him coming they were terrified and screamed "It's a ghost!". Lots to unpack, here. First: only Matthew and Mark tell us that the disciples thought they were seeing a ghost. Did they think the apparition they saw was a ghost of Jesus? Did they think that Christ had died in the last few hours? I don't think so. In fact, we find Yeshua saying not to worry because "it is I". That is, they didn't know the identity of this apparition that was walking across the waves and coming towards them.

In that era, large bodies of water were mystical to the people. It was a common

belief that evil spirits and scary creatures lived under those dark waters. Goodness, even to this day there are cultures in this world that think sea monsters exist. So without doubt they thought that in the midst of the storm an evil spirit (a ghost) had arisen from the churned up waters and was coming towards them with bad intent. Water was thought of as the realm of chaos and evil. So a storm was seen as those creatures living below the surface causing the chaos and evil above it. Yes, this is superstition, which the Bible certainly does not teach. But it just goes to show how steeped in pagan societal beliefs that Israel had become... even the disciples.

This is another of those Bible stories (and especially New Testament stories) that points out just how important it is to consider the 1st century Jewish context and background it is told in. The Tanakh (the Old Testament) makes it clear that only God can walk on water. Job 9 we find this:

**CJB Job 9:7-8 <sup>7</sup> He commands the sun, and it fails to rise; he shuts up the stars under his seal. <sup>8</sup> He alone spreads out the sky and walks on the waves in the sea.**

In Psalms we read:

**CJB Psalm 77:19-20 <sup>19</sup> The sound of your thunder was in the whirlwind, the lightning flashes lit up the world, the earth trembled and shook. <sup>20</sup> Your way went through the sea, your path through the turbulent waters; but your footsteps could not be traced.**

And how could any of us forget:

**CJB Genesis 1:1 *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. <sup>2</sup> The earth was unformed and void, darkness was on the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God hovered over the surface of the water.***

The point is that we are meant to see just what the disciples were meant to see: the sight of Yeshua walking on the water was an epiphany. What is an epiphany? It is an unexpected revelation of God that reveals aspects of His nature or character or attributes. Thus the divine character and nature of Yeshua that has already been publicly demonstrated in His many miracles, and by His unmatched Wisdom, is displayed in spectacular fashion before His disciples. I'll say again: it was well understood within Jewish society on account of the Old Testament

Scriptures that only God could walk on water; and now here is this Jewish Holy Man doing it. If you or I were there, how might we have perceived such a thing? I imagine we would have been just as terrified as they were.

We also can't just flash by the fact that in that era, among Jews, Wisdom (as virtually a person of God, in a similar way to how Christianity thinks of The Son and The Holy Spirit as "persons" of God) is said to walk on water in the Book of Sirach chapter 24. These words I'll quote to you are said to be the person of divine Wisdom speaking:

***<sup>5</sup> I came out of the mouth of the most High, the firstborn before all creatures: <sup>6</sup> I made that in the heavens there should rise light that never faileth, and as a cloud I covered all the earth: <sup>7</sup> I dwelt in the highest places, and my throne is in a pillar of a cloud. <sup>8</sup> I alone have compassed the circuit of heaven, and have penetrated into the bottom of the deep, and have walked in the waves of the sea,***

I am certainly not claiming that Wisdom actually spoke these words, or that Wisdom (per se) is necessarily a "person" of God. The point is that this is how Jewish society in the 1<sup>st</sup> century thought of Wisdom; it is firmly what they believed. And Matthew has gone to great lengths in his Gospel to paint Yeshua as the divine embodiment of Wisdom. So Yeshua walking on water, while taking our breath away as among the most enjoyable and meaningful short stories of the New Testament, made a deeper and somewhat different impression upon Christ's Jewish disciples that witnessed it.

Yeshua perfectly well understood that the disciples would be frightened out of their wits at the sight of Him. So He reassures them first by identifying Himself and then telling them to chill out; stop being afraid. Afraid of what? No doubt it was not just of seeing what they thought was a sea demon but also of their dire predicament in this raging storm.

What comes next is almost a short story unto itself. It tells the story of the disciple Peter more or less saying: "Well, if He can do it, I can do it" and so determines to get out of the boat on walk on the waters, himself. I want to pause here to say that as one might imagine, few Bible academics and scholars give much credence to the story of Jesus or Peter walking on water. Some say it was a much later Christian legend that had been developed and then written back into the Gospel accounts. Others say the petrified disciples were imagining it all as a

result of an extreme fear reaction. Some say that indeed it was some kind of apparition that God conjured up, but it certainly wasn't the flesh and blood Jesus. There are other rationalizations and denials issued besides these. But again we are dealing with an intellectual body that must analyze biblical things within the Scientific Method or they refuse to accept it. That is, the underlying foundation of this story of miracle is automatically dismissed because miracles cannot be justified as scientific or rational.

The only Gospel account of this walking-on-water miracle that includes Peter is Matthew's. He says that once the disciples saw that it was indeed Yeshua, Peter's response was to ask Yeshua to bid him to come to Him into the water. Notice that this request is prefaced with "if it is really you". Remember: Yeshua has already identified Himself so by now surely the disciples must have recognized Him. It seems that Peter's faith was hardly up to snuff. Nonetheless Yeshua indulged Peter and led him into the water. Peter, too, walked on the surface. His excitement overcame his fears; but once the novelty wore off, Peter remembered the wind and the storm he had been enduring the last several hours, and the fears came flooding back; he sunk. He yelled out "Lord save me" and Yeshua reached out His hand, took hold of Peter, and pulled him back to the surface. He then chastised Peter as having "so little trust". This remark has always troubled me because unless there was a pretty significant trust (or faith) involved Peter would never have stepped out of that boat in the first place.

It is common in the world of Bible academics to label this either as a story of an epiphany or as the story of a sea rescue. Rather I see it is a story that revolves around both faith and fear. C.E.B. Cranfield in speaking about Mark's version of Christ walking on water and the disciples' response to the situation, says:

***"...if it is as a result of obedience to Christ's command that the Church or the individual Christian is in a situation of danger or distress, then there is no need of fear."***

I think Peter may be representative of most of us (I am certainly putting myself in this category). He is the man of great faith that oscillates with little faith. He is the man that can hear the Lord calling and obey; but also the man that when things get tough he gets distracted, loses his focus, and his natural fears take over. Yeshua says in verse 31 that the underlying cause of this maddening oscillation is doubt. The Greek word is the verb ***diastazein***. It most literally means to be "of divided mind".



Although I wish that once I was saved my life shifted into auto-pilot such that I could just get up every day and declare "whatever happens is God's will" and then take whatever the day may bring with it in stride, in a spirit of **shalom**, and with a smile on my face, that simply isn't what happens. Even with God's Holy Spirit living within us, it is a far more natural human behavior to focus on our fears than it is to focus on Him. How do we overcome this? To stay focused on God takes concentration. It takes effort. It takes determination. It can be... exhausting.

Peter was fine for a short time because he saw Jesus and he believed. In one part of his mind he was excited to take that big step of faith out of the boat and into the violent Sea. But very quickly the other side of his mind intervened; he lost his concentration when he took stock of what was actually happening all around him. The wind; the rain; the turbulent water under him. It all became bigger in his mind than Yeshua who was standing before him.

As of the moment I am teaching this lesson, it is the year 2020, and it is a world in chaos. Governments are rising and falling, families are disintegrating, people have little or no trust in what were, at one time, cherished institutions that provided stability. The Covid virus still has the world in its grips; and people are fearful to varying degrees not just because of the devastating effects of this virus, but more because of this toxic cocktail of calamities and troubles from which there seems to be no escape. At the core of the message behind the walking-on-water story is that fear is the opposite of faith. Again and again in the Bible we're told by God to "fear not". This is because fear sinks down. Faith lifts up. Fear is a heavy millstone around our necks. Faith is a buoyant life preserver. It is quite easy to say "don't fear"; it's much harder to practice it. I wish it were that we could enter our quiet space and fervently pray to the God of Israel, and then turn around and leave that space and our fears behind. It doesn't usually work that way because trust and faith isn't more prayer; trust and faith is living out those prayers.

The good news is that our trust and faith are only part of the story. The other part is that when we're sinking, for Believers there is the ready hand of our Savior to rescue us. I'm glad for this because on any given day I don't have a perfect faith. Peter's faith didn't leave him as he stepped overboard and then noticed the chaos; Yeshua says it just became "little". King David puts it in a way that perhaps many of you can identify with.

**CJB Psalm 69:1 For the leader. Set to "Lilies." By David: <sup>2</sup> Save me, God! For the water threatens my life. <sup>3</sup> I am sinking down in the mud, and there is no foothold; I have come into deep water; the flood is sweeping over me. I am exhausted from crying...**

The danger Peter faced when he cried out "Lord! Save me!" was real and not imagined. The dangers David was facing when He cried out "Save me, God!" were real and not imagined. The dangers we all face in this worldwide era of chaos and pandemic, whether or not we are Believers, are real and not imagined. However, if we are members of Yeshua's flock we can also cry out "Lord save me" and He will.

I want to encourage you with this: as Christ's devoted followers, a failure of our faith will almost certainly occur because we are human beings. But it doesn't mean we have abandoned God or that He has abandoned us. Yeshua didn't accuse Peter of having **lost** his faith. We don't have to fear; as strange as it may seem, many biblical passages make fear over faith as a choice we make. But to overcome fear, and to replace it with unshakable trust and faith in God, takes effort and practice; it doesn't come naturally. What better time to start than right now.

Verse 32 says that Jesus and Peter climbed into the boat and the instant they did, the storm halted. The disciples were so overcome with awe at all they had just witnessed that they fell at the feet of Yeshua and exclaimed: "You really are God's Son". In this moment the disciples discovered something that they just had not been able to accept. Something that Matthew takes us back to, in order to close the circle.

**CJB Matthew 3:16-17 <sup>16</sup> As soon as Yeshua had been immersed, he came up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, he saw the Spirit of God coming down upon him like a dove, <sup>17</sup> and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; I am well pleased with him."**

We shouldn't be judgmental over the disciples saying "you really are" God's Son. That is, it's something that they had heard, but now they understand the incredible meaning. God's son and son of God were terms that were common in Hebrew history and had a certain meaning in Jewish religious society. A son of God was a biblical term for an ordained king of Israel. The Old Testament refers to all of Israel's kings as sons of God. Yet, it was of course understood that these

sons of God were humans, and certainly not deity.

But here, the disciples finally understood the connection between God and Yeshua; they were literally father and son; The Father and The Son. All of Yeshua's implications that He was the divine Son... implications He spoke that just didn't register in their minds... came together in one of the greatest "Aha!" moments that the Bible records. And yet, that doesn't mean that Yeshua wasn't also a king of Israel. In the **P'shat** sense, the plain sense, Yeshua as the Son of God indeed meant a visible, human king of Israel. But in the **Remez** sense, a hint, a deeper sense of the meaning, He was literally God's divine offspring... God's Son.

It is interesting to me that many excellent New Testament scholars, even one as superior as Daniel J. Harrington, go on to comment that "but according to Mark 6:52 their heart was hardened and they failed to understand". That is, the Mark story of how the disciples responded to the walking-on-water miracle is the opposite of what Matthew claims.

**CJB Mark 6:51-52** <sup>51</sup> *He got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. They were completely astounded,* <sup>52</sup> *for they did not understand about the loaves; on the contrary, their hearts had been made stone-like...*

Other Bible translations say it the same way. But what seems to get set aside by some Bible commentators is that Mark wasn't talking about the walking-on-water miracle that made their hearts stone-like, but rather it was the miracle of the fishes and loaves (as the verses so plainly state). This is an example of why it is so outstanding that we have these 4 ancient Gospel accounts to refer to, in order that we can check all the Gospel accounts on this story, and then mentally stitch them together to get a more full picture of what went on. It is that, according to Mark, the disciples thought it was pretty cool that Yeshua took 2 fish and 5 loaves of bread and somehow multiplied it to feed around 10,000 men, women and children. But... they still didn't get who Yeshua really was. And the reason they couldn't is that their hearts had been made stone-like. Remembering the axiom that in modern terms we must think of heart as meaning mind (a function of our brain), then it is that the disciples were still hard headed. They just couldn't open their minds to the truth of the revelation of God on earth that stood daily in their presence. However, Yeshua walking on water and quelling the storm finally broke through those hardened minds such that they could say (and I paraphrase) "just like John the Baptist had told us of the words that he heard coming out of the sky

that this man he was immersing was God's Son, now we get it that this is what was meant. Yeshua really is the divine seed of The Father".

Verses 34 - 36 sort of summarize what has just happened, and it brings this chapter to a close. It says they landed at Ginosar. And when the people there saw who it was (we see just how far and wide Yeshua's reputation and even His face had become known), they rushed to one another's neighbors so that they could assemble all those who were ill and with infirmities and take them to Yeshua. For them Jesus was still only a miracle working **Tzadik** (a Jewish Holy Man). And Yeshua, who is always ready to heal and to rescue because that is His.... and God The Father's... nature, healed all who came to Him that day.

Matthew remarks that many simply wanted Him to allow the sick to touch "the hem of His garment" or "the fringe of His robe" or some such thing because they thought His power was that great. These terms are all dutifully avoiding the obvious. It is that no common Jewish person's garment in that era was hemmed. Nor was there a fringe or some such decorative thing attached to the bottom of their outer tunic. Rather this can only be speaking of the thing that Jews in Christ's day, and long before, wore in obedience to a command of God: **tzitzit**, and they were not located down by the ankle.

I've spoken at length about **tzitziyot** (plural of **tzitzit**) in my teachings on the Torah. These are God-ordained tassels made in a very specific way, that are to be used as memory devices for His people.

**CJB Numbers 15:38-41** <sup>38</sup> **"Speak to the people of Isra'el, instructing them to make, through all their generations, tzitziyot on the corners of their garments, and to put with the tzitzit on each corner a blue thread.** <sup>39</sup> **It is to be a tzitzit for you to look at and thereby remember all of ADONAI's mitzvot and obey them, so that you won't go around wherever your own heart and eyes lead you to prostitute yourselves;** <sup>40</sup> **but it will help you remember and obey all my mitzvot and be holy for your God.** <sup>41</sup> **I am ADONAI your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt in order to be your God. I am ADONAI your God."**

Matthew concludes that all who touched not Yeshua's person, not His flesh, but rather merely the **tzitzit** He wore were healed.

We'll begin Matthew chapter 15 next time.

