

# Bible Studies about Peter

## Study 3: Peter's Walk on Water

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### Background

In our first two studies on the disciple Peter, we looked at the calling of Peter and Peter's concept of Christ. In this next study we will take a look at the account of Peter walking on water.

Having just fed five thousand men, besides women and children<sup>1</sup>, Jesus asked the disciples to get into the boat and go on ahead of Him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee while he dismissed the crowd.<sup>2</sup> Immediately after this:



*"...he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning<sup>3</sup> he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."*

*Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."<sup>4</sup>*



### The Message

The disciples were disheartened to be in a boat and once again in a storm – *"battered by the waves...for the wind was against them."* Although they were initially without the Lord Jesus, they had been in similar circumstances previously<sup>5</sup>. They should also have remembered the Psalm where it tells us *"You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them."*<sup>6</sup> Consequently, they should have had little fear - particularly when we remember that they had just witnessed Jesus feeding the five thousand. The account in Mark's gospel tells us that when the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water *"they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened."*<sup>7</sup> In the account in Matthew's gospel we may also read how *"When they got into the boat, the wind ceased."*<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 14:13-21

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 14:22

<sup>3</sup> Other translations indicate that this was the fourth watch in the night which was between 3:00 and 6:00 am. The Romans divided the night into four watches: (1) 6:00 - 9:00 pm; (2) 9:00 - midnight; (3) midnight to 3:00 am and (4) 3:00 - 6:00 am

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 14:22-33

<sup>5</sup> Luke 8:22-25

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 89:9

<sup>7</sup> Mark 6:51-52

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 14:32

What is important here is not the miracle itself, but what the act of Peter tells us about true faith. So often when we hear teaching on these verses the focus is how Peter became frightened by the wind and began to sink. Well, perhaps Peter's faith wasn't sufficient to prevent him from overcoming his doubts and fears "*when he noticed the strong wind*" but maybe the significant point here is presented by Jesus immediately reaching out to catch his hand and sustaining him. What clearer way could we be reminded that our faith has to be based upon and reliant upon the "*the pioneer and perfecter of our faith*"<sup>9</sup>? Indeed, Peter demonstrated great courage which perhaps made him more eager than the rest to express his love for Christ. We are also reminded of how faith may so often be tested by adversity, but should also be expressed in humility. We must be honest in our faith and be prepared to say "*I believe; help my unbelief!*"<sup>10</sup>

We should also note that Peter demonstrated a profound and child-like trust when he said to Jesus "*command me to come to you on the water.*" Those few words speak volumes...I wonder if in Peter's mind were thoughts of how much he loved Jesus, how much he wanted to be with him and how much he wanted to trust in him? No other disciple seems to have expressed the same desire. Despite Peter's act requiring great courage, he waited for that call or instruction from Jesus before stepping out in faith into the unknown – rather than rushing forward regardless. He also stepped out towards Jesus. A miracle should always glorify and point to the Lord our God, rather than building pride and vanity in the individual concerned.

In a broken world, this account also reminds us that Jesus bears us up above the world, and keeps us from sinking into it and being overwhelmed – even if a storm is raging all around us and our false security (the boat) is not with us. "*For whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?*"<sup>11</sup>

When Peter began to sink he did not turn to the boat (false security), but instinctively he cried out "*Lord, save me!*" When our faith is diminished, we should always seek the Lord in humility and prayer and ask for our faith to be strengthened and restored rather than cast around for worldly props to shore ourselves up on.

In the accounts of Peter in the Bible it is evident that he was impulsive in so many things, not least in his devotion to Jesus. In this he sometimes committing himself without really thinking through what the consequences might be. He never seemed to have questioned himself when he asked Jesus to "*command me to come to you on the water*", and at the time of asking the thought of sinking never appears to have entered his mind. It is not until he is in the water that he begins to doubt, when of all times this is perhaps the time when he should have least doubted. There in front of him was His Lord Jesus who he later came to acknowledge as "*the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*"<sup>12</sup> Perhaps at this later time he remembered implicitly what he had witnessed.

One of the last points to make about this account is the reaction of the rest of the disciples to Jesus – they "*worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'*"<sup>13</sup> Peter's act of faith led to an act of worship – but the act of worship was directed to our gracious Lord Jesus, not to Peter who had walked on water. This is how it should have been, and we should remember this when we witness an act of faith - our praise and worship should be directed at the Lord our God.

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<sup>9</sup> Hebrews 12:2

<sup>10</sup> Mark 9:24

<sup>11</sup> 1 John 5:4-5

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 16:16

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 14:33

## Questions

1. Are our hearts hardened when we hear accounts of the Lord? What practical steps might we take to soften our hearts?
2. What false security do we try to rely upon in times of adversity, and how might we direct our hope and trust to Jesus in these times?
3. Are we honest about our faith, and in what ways could we express our faith more honestly?
4. Imagine that you were in the boat with the disciples. Think about how you might feel in the early hours of the morning on a small boat buffeted by the wind and the waves. Would you be a disciple who remained in the boat, or like Peter would you say to Jesus “*command me to come to you on the water*” and why?
5. How do we react when we see an act of faith, and how can we be sure that the act is genuine?