

## 7 signs from John's gospel: Jesus walks on water: John 6: 16 – 24

Fear comes in different forms doesn't it. There is the fear we experience when we get on a fairground ride. The speed and movement of the ride stirs up a kind of fear, but it's a fun fear! We enjoy it! The ride is simply playing with our minds a little and we go along with the feeling of fear and we enjoy it because we are not in any real danger.

Then there are irrational fears, where people are afraid of things which can't actually hurt them. Some people have very strange phobias! Some people fear clowns or cheese or the colour yellow or the number 13. Many people have a fear of spiders. Now in Australia, that might be a rational fear, but not in England! Spiders in this country can't do us any harm. And yet so many people run out of the room screaming or find themselves standing paralysed when they see even the tiniest 8-legged creature crawl across the top of the bath towards them. Some of you are feeling that right now, even as I mention the word spider. We know that it is an irrational fear, but it's there nevertheless.

But sometimes fear is a right emotion. Faced with a dangerous situation, fear reminds us of the fragility of life and it can sometimes stir up the kind of life-preserving heroic reaction that we would not have thought possible. A frightened swimmer punches a shark on the nose and is able to swim to safety. A threatened woman summons up the courage to scream at the top of her voice and her assailant flees. A timid mother fights off a stronger attacker who threatens her child. That's the fight/flight reaction that is embedded in our psyche and that can sometimes save our lives. But sometimes fear can paralyse us. And that's what happens in this account from John chapter 6. So turn in your Bibles to page 1070 and let's begin by looking at the passage together.

These verses come immediately after Jesus had provided a huge and hungry crowd with more food than they could consume, so much so that there were 12 large baskets of leftovers. As we've seen over the last few weeks Jesus is the bringer of joy, his word is powerful and certain, he is the only one who can provide true rest and the only one who can provide real food for our souls. The feeding miracle we looked at last week is yet another sign of the abundance of God's blessings for his people.

The crowd were impressed with Jesus and his miraculous power and saw him as someone who could lead the Jews into a new age of military strength and political independence from Rome. But Jesus was working to a different agenda so he dismissed the crowd and then went up a mountain to pray. Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus told his disciples to go on ahead of him to the other side of the lake, but it seems that they hung around for a while, perhaps thinking he might join them. But as night fell his disciples got into their boat and headed to the other side of the lake.

The Sea of Galilee is an unusual lake. It's not huge, it's 12 miles long and no more than 7 miles across, but because the lake is several hundred feet below sea level, it is subject to very turbulent winds. Under certain atmospheric conditions strong winds can rush down steep canyons on the shores of the lake and very quickly turn the quiet waters into a tempest. One early travel writer described this way: *"small as the lake is, and placid in general as a molten mirror, I have repeatedly seen it quiver, and leap, and boil like a cauldron, when driven by fierce winds."* On another occasion, the ferocity of those winds would later cause the disciples, many of them hardened fishermen, to fear for their lives.

This storm doesn't seem to have been as bad, but it was not an easy night's cruise. After six or seven hours the disciples had still only gone halfway across the lake, such was the strength of the winds against them. It was dark. They were tired, wet and weary, and Jesus was not with them. Then all of a sudden, they saw a

what they thought was a ghost walking towards the boat! John doesn't use that word, but Mark and Matthew do, and it's a reasonable assumption isn't it? This is something beyond the realms of normal experience! Something supernatural is going on here. And they are paralysed with fear. That's the sense of this word. It's the same word used to describe how the women reacted when they saw the angel at the tomb on that first Easter morning. They were gripped by terror. Here as they stood amidst raging winds and watched this figure walk across the water towards them the disciples were helpless. In that kind of situation, it is impossible not to be scared for your life, and the disciples were.

But then Jesus speaks. He doesn't say very much, just six words. *"It is I. Don't be afraid."* It is I, don't be afraid. Six words which removed their fear. This was no longer something or someone of which to be afraid, this was Jesus. Like Mary Magdalene, overcome with fear and grief at the tomb hearing Jesus simply say 'Mary', or like a lost child frantically searching for their parent until they hear them call their name, when the disciples heard that voice their fear disappeared. So they let him into the boat and soon after arrived at the shore.

Like many of the signs Jesus performs in John's gospel, and this is the fifth, the accounts are simple enough in themselves, but they contain some wonderful truths. Remember John's purpose is that these miraculous signs would give us a clear vision of who Jesus is, so that we might believe and have life in his name. And it's pretty obvious what the message is here isn't it: **Jesus is Lord over creation.** And when we've got our head around that we'll see that there's a second point which flows from it: Because Jesus is Lord over creation we do not need to be overcome by fear.

The natural world awesome in its power, isn't it? Forget the immensity of space, even compared to the power of a hurricane or the scorching heat of a desert or the chill of a mountain blizzard human beings are tiny and frail. But not Jesus. This storm is no threat to him, the waves no obstacle, the wind no hindrance, gravity no problem. Why? Because he is the Lord of creation.

Jesus is the God who can walk across storm tossed waves because he is the God who created the wind and the waves in the first place. In creation he set the boundaries for the seas and the oceans, caused the great flood and dried up the world again. He is the one who calls for the waters and they come, Amos chapter 9; the one who can measure the waters in his hand, Isaiah 40; the one whom the waters praise, Psalm 148. This is our God! This is Jesus, and he is Lord over creation.

When Job brought his complaint to God about the way his life had gone, God answered it by showing him his mastery of creation. Let me read you some of God's words from Job chapter 38:

*"Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched the measuring line across it? On what were its footings set or who laid its cornerstone – while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? Who shut up the sea behind closed doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors in bars in place, when I said, "this far you may come and no further; here is where your proud waves halt?""*

We may build submarines to go almost to the depths of the oceans and ships to sail the roughest seas and vehicles to take us to the polar ice caps and come up with materials and equipment that help us climb the

highest mountains, but even there we are frail and weak. But creation answers to its master's voice. And that master is Jesus!

And of course, it is not just water over which Jesus has great power. Demons flee at his voice. Sickness disappears at his touch or word, and even the power of death is broken and life is restored by the command of the one who is the Resurrection and the Life. At his word and by his promise, repentant sinners are pardoned and welcomed into the family of God, guilt is done away with and a new creation is brought into being. This is Jesus. This is our God!

John wants us to see Jesus' immense power over all these things so that we will put our trust in him and have life in his name. And can you see how Jesus is worthy of that trust? If the world is his, if he is sovereignly active in the world today, which the Scriptures tell us that he is; if he promises us that all things work together for the good of those who love him and has the power and goodness to make good on his promises, then why should we fear the dark or spiders or the raging sea or the angry neighbour? If the Lord of creation has our back, then why should we fear? If we belong to Jesus, if we are his, then because Jesus is Lord over creation we do not need to be overcome by fear, no matter what form it takes.

Now you might think that being a Christian and walking side-by-side with Jesus means that you will never fear anything again, but that isn't the case. We may not need to fear, but we will still experience it. Fear is part of our human experience in a fallen world.

You see fear is real. We live in a broken and sometimes dangerous world and a right awareness of fear sometimes helps us keep safe. And being fallen human beings we will experience irrational fears too. Fear is real, however strong our faith.

Feeling fear is also common to all people. In John chapter 6 those afraid are hardened fishermen, not 7-year-old children. Everybody, old and young, men and women, soldiers and shopkeepers, Christians and non-Christians; everybody feels fear from time to time. That fear can be paralysing, and it often is, but if we know Jesus, it doesn't need to be. We will still feel afraid, but we don't need to be overcome by it. And as I wrap things up I want to leave you with two ways that as a Christian you begin to can overcome fear.

Firstly, by **remembering who Jesus is.**

The disciples' fear disappeared, not simply because they recognised Jesus' voice but because they knew who Jesus is. They'd already seen Jesus turn water into wine, heal an official's son with just a word of command, make a lame man walk, feed 5000 people with just a small boy's packed lunch, and we know from the other Gospels that by now Jesus had performed many other miraculous signs too. Bit by bit, the disciples picture of Jesus was being formed, and although right then they didn't see the whole picture, they knew enough to recognise his power and might and authority and to know that they were safe with him.

But we are in the privileged position of seeing the whole picture. We know that all creation was brought into being and is now sustained moment by moment by Jesus' word of command. We know that out of his love and compassion Jesus, though he was fully God, came to earth, lived a perfect life, died on the cross for our sins, descended to the dead and rose again so that we too may live.

This is the one who calls all people come to him. This is the one who invites us into his family and says to us that he will walk with us and protect us and provide for us like a good shepherd. In those times when we start to feel afraid, when the panic sets in and we feel paralysed by fear we need to remember just who

is standing with us. We need to call to mind his might and glory, his control over nature, his eternal power, his constant presence. How can we be overcome by fear when we have Jesus?

When the disciples heard Jesus' voice, and remembered who he was, they no longer feared. And neither should we.

Secondly, we begin to overcome fear **by trusting his promises.**

I think I'm right in saying that the feeling of fear is related to losing something we value and the painful consequences of its loss.

Perhaps our greatest fear is losing someone in our family, whether through death or divorce, because those relationships provide the basis for believing that we are loved. Lose them and we feel alone.

Perhaps our greatest fear is losing our talents or abilities, maybe in an accident, maybe through illness or disease or simply through getting older because those things define who we are and give us our identity and dignity. Without those things, without our independence, how can we live and still look at ourselves in the mirror?

Perhaps our greatest fear is losing some treasured possessions, losing our job or having no money, because deep down our security in the present or hopes for the future are wrapped up in those things. How would life go on if we lost them?

Perhaps our greatest fear is losing our reputation, having our character tainted or losing our friends, because we need other people to make us feel somebody. If we are hated or mocked then perhaps we'd lose our self-worth and be too ashamed to go on.

Perhaps our greatest fear is our own death.

Now none of those things we might fear losing are bad, in fact, family and our abilities and a good reputation, even life itself, are all gifts from God to be treasured and enjoyed, but none of those things last. These are wonderful gifts, but they are only temporary. And the way to overcome our fear of losing them isn't to disregard their value, but to value them rightly and to see them in the eternal context of the promises Jesus makes to those who love him.

You see, we may fear losing those we love in this life, but no one can snatch us out of the Father's hand. If we are in Christ, we are safe with him for all eternity and his love for us never ever fails.

We may fear losing our abilities or independence and not being the person we once were, but at the end of this life Christians will be made like Jesus; sinless, holy, and eternal with resurrection bodies that will never wear out and where we will be truly satisfied for all eternity.

We may fear losing our money or our homes because we don't know how we would cope without them. But Jesus calls us to consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, to see the way your heavenly Father cares for them and know that as God's beloved children we are worth more than fields of flowers and flocks of birds.

And if we fear losing our reputation, if we fear being laughed at because we are a Christian, then remember who we are in Christ. We are no longer just a man or just a woman, but a son or daughter of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. If we would overcome fear then we must remember who we are in

Christ. Remember that our names are written in the Lamb's book of life. Remember that we are loved so much Jesus went to the cross to pay the price for our sin.

Friends, if we want to overcome our fear then we need to remember who Jesus is and trust his promises because our lasting treasure is in Heaven.

I don't want to diminish the value of friends and families and talents and a good reputation, but for a Christian to be paralysed with fear over these things and unable to cope is like Bill Gates having a breakdown because he lost his car keys. A poor man may weep and wail over the loss of £50, it's all he had. But as children of the King we are joint-heirs with Christ of God's eternal kingdom and our inheritance is off the scale. And however long we may live, however good our lives might be, it is just the tiniest fraction, the merest hint of what God has prepared for those who love him.

The result of this remembering of and trusting in Jesus is that the Christian has **a secure life with a certain future and peaceful present**. Storms will come, fears and anxieties will rise, but they cannot, they will not overwhelm us. Listen to his words from Isaiah 43: *"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the holy one of Israel, your Saviour."*

Whatever storms you are going through, if you are a Christian, you have a certain future and you should have a peaceful present. Those are your birth-rights as children of God. You do not need to fear the present, no matter how frightening it may be, no matter how fierce the storms, because your future is certain and you can trust the promises of God that even your trials will ultimately turn out to have been for your good. If you doubt that, go and read the story of Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers, or reflect on the glory that resulted from Jesus' death on the cross. And in this story, just think what happened to the faith of the disciples after this little night time sailing adventure!

Let me finish with a quote from JC Ryle, the former Bishop of Liverpool: *"many of the things which now frighten Christians, and fill them with anxiety, would cease to frighten them if they would endeavour to see the Lord Jesus in all, ordering every providence, and overruling everything, so that not a hair falls to the ground without him."*

The Lord who walked on the lake, the Lord who walks beside us, is the Lord of glory; the sovereign Lord who shapes human history, who keeps his promises and leads us through the storms of life both for our good and for his greater glory. This is the Lord who loved us so much that while we were still sinners came to earth as a man and gave up his life for us on the cross. In the light of such great love, of such certain promises, of such immeasurable power, how can we fear?

Whatever fears are blighting your life today will fade as you gaze more intently on the face of Jesus. Come to him. Trust him. And let his perfect love cast out your fear. Amen.