

Jesus and the Storm

Matthew 14:22–36

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The Chronology of Jesus' Ministry

For the past four years, in the season between Christmas and Easter, we have been working through the Gospel of Matthew. Before we come to our passage today, I want to offer a brief chronological survey of Jesus' ministry — a kind of 30,000-foot view — so that we can understand not only what is happening in Matthew 14 but why it matters so much.

My chronology of Jesus' ministry is anchored in his death and resurrection, which took place during Passover in AD 33 — specifically, April 3 of that year. The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus celebrated three other Passovers during his earthly ministry: April of AD 30 (John 2:13), April of AD 31 (John 5:1), and April of AD 32 (John 6:4). Scripture also tells us that the prophetic ministry of John the Baptist began in the fifteenth year of Tiberius, which places his debut around AD 28 or 29 (Luke 3:1). This means Jesus was most likely baptized in mid-to-late AD 29, after which the Gospel of John shows him spending approximately a year ministering in Judea (John 1:29–4:45).

It is not until John the Baptist is imprisoned that Jesus moves north to Galilee and begins his ministry around the Sea of Galilee — roughly late AD 30. That Galilean ministry will last until the summer or fall of AD 32, and it is this period that the books of Matthew and Mark are primarily concerned with (Matthew 4:12–14:36). From the opening of Matthew 4, the narrative is filled with story after story: Jesus healing the sick, casting out demons, preaching the Sermon on the Mount, telling parables. The crowds love him. People race around the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee just to be near him when his boat comes to land.

But then everything begins to change.

In the spring of AD 32 — just weeks before the third Passover, roughly one year before the crucifixion — Jesus' popularity begins to wane. From this point forward, we see a growing animosity from the religious leaders, shrinking crowds, and followers who had once pressed close beginning to fall away. Jesus himself begins to withdraw, spending more concentrated time with his inner circle. In the spring of AD 32, thousands upon thousands were clamoring to get near him. A year later, during Passover of AD 33, Jesus hangs alone upon the cross, deserted by nearly everyone.

That decline begins in our passage today, Matthew 14:22–36.

The Context: After the Feeding of the Five Thousand

Before we read from Matthew, I want to read a detail that only the Gospel of John preserves — something that happened at the very end of the feeding of the five thousand. John 6:13–15:

“So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, ‘This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!’ Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”

Matthew does not include this detail, but it is essential for understanding what follows. A riot was breaking out. The crowd, electrified by the miracle, had made up their minds: Jesus was the Prophet, he was the King, and they were going to crown him whether he consented or not. With that context in place, let us read Matthew 14, beginning at verse 21 for continuity.

“And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.”

Matthew does not tell us why Jesus moves so urgently. But John tells us. A mob was forming. Jesus turned to his disciples and got them away from the situation as quickly as he could — and then he turned to face the crowd himself. Matthew simply says he dismissed them. I will confess I have no idea how he managed that. But he did. And once the crowds were gone, Jesus went up the mountain alone to pray.

The Prayer on the Mountain

“And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.”

If you glance ahead to verse 25, you will see that Jesus remains on that mountain through the night, all the way until the fourth watch — somewhere between three and five in the morning. That is eight to ten hours alone with the Father in the dark.

Scripture does not tell us directly what Jesus prayed about in those long, silent hours. But I am convinced of at least two things he was bringing before the Father.

First, I believe Jesus was praying for the Father's will to be done. This was the constant posture of his prayer life. When he taught his disciples to pray, he gave them these words: *"Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"* (Matthew 6:10). In Gethsemane, pressed to the point of sweating drops of blood, he would cry out: *"Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will"* (Matthew 26:39). From the wilderness to the garden, Jesus lived and breathed one singular prayer — *Father, your will, not mine.*

But he was praying that prayer because he was facing what may have been the most serious temptation of his earthly ministry outside of Gethsemane. Luke notes that after the wilderness temptations, the devil departed from Jesus *"until an opportune time"* (Luke 4:13). I believe this was one of those opportune times.

Consider what Jesus was being tempted with. In terms of his earthly ministry, he had never been more popular than he was at that moment. Thousands were ready to crown him king — by force if necessary. And think about what he could have done as king in that hour. He could have dealt with Herod Antipas, the man who had just beheaded John the Baptist. He could have shattered Rome to pieces — the iron rod of the Son of God spoken of in Psalm 2 was not a metaphor. Here, on the cusp of Passover, with a crowd of thousands ready to march behind him, the temptation was real and it was powerful: become the Messiah they want. Rule. Conquer. Avenge.

At its deepest level, this was the temptation to deal with the problem of sin as a conquering king rather than as a suffering servant — to be the one who pours out wrath rather than the one upon whom wrath is poured out, the one who takes away the sin of the world. Outside of Gethsemane, if there was ever a moment Jesus was tempted to call down legions of angels and take a different path, this was it.

And so he went up the mountain. Alone. And he prayed: *Father — not my will. Yours.*

The second thing I am convinced Jesus prayed for was his disciples — that they would truly know him.

In John 17, the great High Priestly Prayer on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus opens his heart to the Father and prays: *"This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent"* (John 17:3). Knowing the Father, knowing the Son — this is the beating heart of Jesus' intercession. And I believe that same prayer was rising from that mountain on this night.

Why? Because of what unfolds next.

Consider the parallel between Jesus' temptation and his disciples' temptation. Jesus is being tempted to be the wrong kind of Messiah — the conquering king with the iron rod rather than the suffering servant with the cross. And the disciples share the very same temptation. They want the thrones. They are already arguing about who will be greatest in the kingdom (Matthew 18:1). James and John will soon send their mother to lobby for the seats of honor at Jesus' right and left hand (Matthew 20:21). What the disciples are hoping for is nearly identical to what the crowd wanted when they tried to crown Jesus by force.

This is why, I believe, Jesus does not simply send the disciples away for their safety. He sends them into the storm for their formation. As long as they were standing in that crowd, breathing that air, they were in danger of being shaped by that same vision of a political deliverer who would break Rome and restore the kingdom of Israel. So Jesus gets them out of it. He puts them in a boat, points them toward the other shore, and sends them into the dark.

And in the dark, the storm comes.

The Storm

“But the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified and said, ‘It is a ghost!’ and they cried out in fear.”

I want to pause on that word *ghost*, because our English translations actually do us a disservice here. In modern imagination, a ghost tends to be morally neutral — a sad, flickering figure rattling chains in a hallway. And because another Greek word, *pneuma*, is sometimes rendered “ghost” — as in the Holy Ghost — the word has lost much of its edge. But the word Matthew uses here is not *pneuma*. It is *phantasma* — phantom. In the cultural imagination of first-century Palestine, a *phantasma* was not simply a disembodied spirit; it was something malevolent. A terrifying presence rising up from the deep to do harm. That is why they cried out in terror.

Now consider what this reveals about the disciples. These are men who have walked with Jesus for nearly three years. They have watched him heal the blind, cleanse lepers, raise the dead, and moments ago feed a multitude with a child's lunch. And yet, when Jesus comes to them across the water in the dark, they do not recognize him. Worse — they mistake him for a phantom. That is not simply a failure of eyesight in a storm. That is a revelation of how deeply they still misunderstand who Jesus is.

But then Jesus speaks.

“But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.’”

In our English translations, that phrase *it is I* sounds almost casual — almost reassuring in a mundane sense. But in the Greek, it is anything but casual. The words are *ego eimi* — literally, *I AM*. The same words God spoke to Moses from the burning bush when Moses asked his name: “*I AM WHO I AM*” (Exodus 3:14). Jesus is not simply saying, *Relax, it’s just me*. He is saying: The one walking toward you on the water is the God of the burning bush. The God of the Exodus. The God who divided the Red Sea. *I AM*. Do not be afraid.

In the book of Job, when Job speaks of the incomparable majesty of God, he says: “*He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea*” (Job 9:8). Only God walks on water. And here is Jesus, walking on water. The prayer Jesus prayed alone on that mountain — *Father, let them know who I am* — is now being answered in the middle of a storm.

Peter on the Water

And at least one of the disciples hears it. Something breaks open in Peter, and he does the most remarkable thing. He doesn’t shrink back into the boat. He leans over the side and says:

“Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

This is a remarkable confession of faith. Peter is saying: *If you are the one who treads on the waves of the sea — if you are truly I AM — then where you are, I want to be. May I come to you?* And Jesus answers with one word:

“Come.”

“So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus.”

Notice — the wind is still howling. The waves are still rolling. The storm has not stopped. But here is Peter, a fisherman who knows better than anyone what happens to a man who steps out of a boat in the middle of the sea. And yet here he is, standing on the surface of the water, moving toward Jesus. For one extraordinary moment, Peter is living in the very reality that the prayer on the mountain was about. He sees Jesus. He knows Jesus. And in knowing Jesus — in trusting his word and his command — the impossible becomes the ground beneath his feet.

But then he took his eyes off Jesus and began to sink.

“*But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, ‘Lord, save me.’*”

Peter does not sink because the storm got worse. He sinks because he looked away. The moment his gaze moved from Jesus to the wind, fear replaced faith — and fear does not walk on water.

But notice also what Jesus does.

“*Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him.*”

Immediately. No hesitation. No delay. No lecture before the rescue. He reaches out and catches Peter first — and *then* he says: “*O you of little faith, why did you doubt?*” The suffering servant pulls Peter up with his own hand.

“*And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’*”

Do you see it? Not on the beach after lunch. Not in the crowd shouting for a king. Not in the warm glow of a miracle with a full stomach — but in a storm, in the dark, in the place where they were terrified and completely out of control. *This* is where the disciples finally see Jesus for who he is and confess: *Truly you are the Son of God*. And they worshiped him. This is the first time in Matthew’s Gospel that the disciples make this confession. And it took a storm to get them there.

This is precisely why I believe Jesus prayed for his disciples to know him up on that mountain — because it was this prayer that the storm answered.

What the Storm Teaches

Twelve ordinary men had walked with Jesus, eaten with Jesus, watched Jesus heal the sick and raise the dead and feed a multitude with a boy’s lunch — and they did not truly know or understand who Jesus was until the storm. This is not an accident.

We live in a culture that has handed us a version of faith built on clear skies and smooth sailing — where the evidence that God is with you is measured in comfort, success, and the absence of trouble. The feeding of the five thousand is where people expect to meet God: in the provision, in the miracle, in the moment when everything works out. And so when the storm comes, when the wind is against you and the waves are breaking over the bow, the instinct is to wonder whether God has forgotten you or turned away.

But look at what Matthew shows us. The feeding of the five thousand did not produce worship. It produced a riot. It produced a crowd that wanted to hijack Jesus for their own political agenda. The storm, however — the storm produced worship. *Truly, you are the Son of God.* The miracle fed their stomachs and inflamed their ambitions. The storm showed them their Savior.

The storms in your life are not evidence of God's absence. They may be the very place where you encounter Jesus at the deepest level you have ever known.

Some of you are in a storm right now. A diagnosis. A fracturing marriage. A grief you carry every morning like a stone in your chest. You are exhausted from rowing. Notice the detail in the text: Jesus came to the disciples in the fourth watch — the last watch before dawn. He did not come at the first sign of trouble. He came at what felt like the last possible moment. But he came, walking on the water, and speaking into the storm: *Do not be afraid. I AM.*

That is his word to you today. He is with you in the storm you are in right now. And he is calling you to draw near to him.

I love what Peter does in this story. When he hears and sees Jesus, notice what he asks for — and what he doesn't. He does not ask for the storm to stop. He does not ask for the boat to reach shore. He simply asks: *I want to be where you are. Let me come to you.* And Jesus said one word: *Come.* That may be precisely what Jesus is saying to you today in your storm. Come. Be near to me. And I will sustain you.

I also love the grace Jesus shows when Peter begins to sink. As Peter goes down, he cries out: *Lord, save me.* And what does Jesus do? He does not let Peter drown. He does not wait for Peter to pull himself together first. He immediately reaches out his hand and saves him. That is grace. Jesus does not wait until you have it all figured out, until you have all the answers, until your life is in order. He reaches out and saves you when you are drowning and you cry out to him: *Save me.*

The Shore at Gennesaret

“And when they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. And when the men of that place recognized him, they sent around to all that region and brought to him all who were sick and implored him that they might only touch the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.”

The same Jesus who speaks into the storm — *I AM, do not be afraid* — is the Jesus who stands on the shore and lets trembling hands reach for the fringe of his garment. The one

worshiped as the Son of God is also the one who allows the broken, the sick, the exhausted, the desperate, to come near to him.

Majesty without distance.

Holiness without harshness.

Power without cruelty.

Matthew's point is this: when you finally see who he is in the storm, you know you can trust him on the shore. Jesus Christ is the Son of God — worthy of worship, and near enough to touch.

Where Are You in the Story?

Are you in the crowd? You want Jesus — on your terms. Fix my problems. Feed my appetite. Defeat my enemies. Bless my plans. But Jesus will not be crowned by force. He will not be used as a tool for our agenda. He is not a mascot. He is Lord. The call is simple: stop managing him and start worshiping him. Repent of using Jesus, and come bow to Jesus.

Are you in the boat — exhausted? You have been rowing against the wind for a long time. You are tired and afraid, trying to hold everything together, and it feels as though heaven is silent. Hear this: he sees you. He is interceding for you. And he comes — sometimes later than we want, but never too late. His word to you is the same he spoke across the water to those twelve frightened men: *Take heart. I AM. Do not be afraid.* Do not interpret the storm as abandonment. Let it become the place where you finally know him.

Are you Peter — sinking? Maybe you heard Jesus say *Come*, and you did the impossible — you stepped out of the boat. You trusted him with something that terrified you. You quit the job that was destroying your soul. You had the hard conversation. You chose obedience even when it made no sense. And for a moment — maybe just a breath — you were walking on water. You felt his presence. You knew he was real. But then you looked at the wind and began to sink. If that is you, cry out to him: *Save me.* His hand is already reaching out for you.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God — we worship you. Truly you are the Son of God.

In the storm you speak: *I AM. Do not be afraid.*

Father, for those among us who have tried to crown Jesus on our own terms — grant repentance. Teach us to stop managing you and to start worshiping you. Make our hearts bow where our lips have only spoken.

For those who are in the boat — exhausted, afraid, rowing against the wind — let your Word settle over them: *Take heart. I AM. Do not be afraid.* Give endurance for the night and faith for the dark.

And for those who are sinking, with only a cry left — we pray Peter’s prayer: *Lord, save me.* Reach out your hand, lift them up, and hold them fast. Bring us near to you, Jesus. Lead us to trust you — whether in storm or on shore — until the day we see you face to face.

We pray this in your mighty name. Amen.

Appendix: Chronology of Jesus’ Ministry

The Beginning of Gospel Ministry (AD 28/29) Luke 3:1 places the beginning of John the Baptist’s ministry around AD 28/29. Jesus is baptized and tempted approximately AD 29.

Early Judean Ministry (Late AD 29 – Spring AD 30) This period is recorded primarily in the Gospel of John (John 1:29–4:45), including the overlap of the ministries of John and Jesus (John 3:22–36) and the first Passover (John 2:13–25) in April AD 30.

Galilean Ministry (Late AD 30 – Fall AD 32) Jesus moves to Galilee after John’s imprisonment (Matthew 4:12). This period includes the second Passover in April AD 31 (John 5:1) and the third Passover in April AD 32 (John 6:4). It is recorded in Matthew 4:12–14:36 and Mark 1:14–9:1.

Jesus Withdraws (Spring AD 32) Following John’s death and the events of Matthew 14, Jesus begins to withdraw from the crowds. This period is recorded in Matthew 15:1–16:13.

The Judean Ministry: Jesus Sets His Face toward Jerusalem (AD 32–33) Recorded primarily in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 9:18–19:27).

Holy Week (April AD 33 — Passover #4) Matthew 21–28 · Mark 11–16 · Luke 19–24 · John 12–21