

GETTING OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE



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Matthew 14:22-23
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Matthew 14:22-33

Several years ago, I was reading about a concept called the “Cozy Paradox.” The author, Marc Schoen, began by stating something that’s probably obvious: namely, the majority of Americans lead incredibly comfortable, incredibly cozy lives, at least compared with people in other times and cultures. In fact, our technology and our materialism have arguably made us the most comfortable people who have ever lived. And yet, paradoxically, as Schoen goes on to say, as we’ve become more and more comfortable, we’ve also become more and more sensitive to discomfort. If things aren’t exactly the way we want them—if we don’t get precisely what makes us comfortable—we tend to become quickly unsettled, unhappy, and uncozy.¹

This concept is similar to the fairy tale “The Princess and the Pea,” about the princess who slept on top of a huge stack of mattresses and was irritated by a small pea placed under the bottom mattress. Many of us are like that. We lead cushioned lives and find ourselves irritated by essentially small peas. If our cell phone battery goes dead or if we get stuck in a traffic jam, it can rattle our equilibrium, or at least rattle our equilibrium far more than it should, especially given the overall spectrum of human suffering.

The question is: in a culture that pursues and perhaps even worships the maximization of personal comfort, should followers of Jesus be doing the same? Should we as Christians be pursuing what the world pursues, especially knowing that the maximization of personal comfort may lead to increased sensitivity to discomfort? I suspect most Christians would immediately respond with an emphatic no! No, we are not to adopt the world’s values and make personal comfort our god. However, my concern, both personally and for the American church generally, is that the world’s values have not only seeped into the church, but they have also seeped into the church in a far more significant way than we might like to admit.

This morning we’re exploring the idea that God has a higher calling for us than worldly comfort. God has far more for us than mere comfort and coziness. Moreover, God’s higher calling may sometimes involve

forcing us out of our comfort zone and may sometimes include encouraging us to step out of our comfort zone intentionally. It may involve encouraging us to take risks and to do things that would otherwise be impossible without the Lord’s supernatural help.

With that in mind, the passage we’ll be looking at today is the famous story of Jesus walking on water. It’s a story that is recounted in three of the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, and John—although today we’ll be looking almost exclusively at Matthew’s account. Here, in Matthew, additional information is included that is not found in Mark and John. In Matthew, we are given the additional story, the additional subplot, of Peter walking on water—of Peter walking on water just like Jesus, at least for a short time.

By way of context, at this point in Jesus’ ministry, Jesus and his disciples are on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus has just miraculously fed a crowd of 5,000 men, plus women and children—a total of perhaps 10,000-15,000 people. He has supernaturally multiplied two small fish and five loaves of barley bread, providing enough food to satisfy the entire crowd. In fact, afterwards, twelve baskets of broken pieces were collected.

Also, according to John’s gospel, soon after the miracle, the crowd began clamoring to make Jesus king. The Israelites had been miraculously fed with manna in the wilderness, and now Jesus had miraculously fed them as well. What better king than one who could provide a permanent free lunch? What better king than The King of Comfort? A day or so later, Jesus will deal with the crowd about this. He will deal with them about their limited desire to have only their physical needs met. However, here in Matthew, the time is immediately after the broken pieces have been collected, and the crowd is clamoring to make Jesus king.

Matthew 14:22-24:

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the

mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them.

It may initially seem strange that Jesus would send his disciples away and dismiss the crowd. After all, 15,000 people wanted to make him king. Humanly speaking, it would make more sense to ride the wave of popular support and adulation. It would make more sense for Jesus to let the crowd crown him as Israel's monarch. And yet, supernaturally speaking, Jesus' hour had not yet come—his hour to be publically proclaimed as the nation's king. That hour wouldn't come until Palm Sunday. It wouldn't come until Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy from 500 years earlier: "Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9).

Perhaps the disciples had become swept up in the commotion and joined the crowd in calling for Jesus to be made king. Perhaps Jesus sent the disciples back across the Sea of Galilee to protect them from the influence of the crowd.

God's greater plan: increasing our faith

However, there may be a deeper reason for Jesus sending the disciples away—a reason connected to his higher calling for them. It may be, as Ray Stedman observed, that Jesus was actually initiating a kind of spiritual test, a kind of spiritual examination, testing their faith. Indeed, this may be part of God's higher calling for us as well—forcing us out of our comfort zone in order to test our faith and ultimately to increase our faith. As long as we remain in our comfort zone—as long as life remains cozy—our faith doesn't grow, or at least it doesn't grow as quickly as it might when we're brought to the end of ourselves and forced to trust in God.

In reality, every Christian is in The School of Faith. Every believer is in a spiritual school where God's objective is to develop and deepen our faith. In this school, there are lower division, upper division, and graduate level classes. In lower division classes, we have a trial, we pray, and the trial goes away. In upper division classes, we have a trial, we pray, and the trial doesn't go away. In graduate level classes, we have a trial, we pray, and the trial gets worse. In every class, God's objective is the same: to increase our faith, to increase our trust in him, and he designs the curriculum specifically with

each of us in mind. It's an individualized education program. My curriculum is different than yours, and yours is different than mine.

As we'll see shortly, the disciples are about to find themselves in a graduate level class in The School of Faith. Here, however, in the opening verses, they set off across the lake in obedience to Jesus. They begin rowing westward, across the northern end of the Sea of Galilee and find themselves battling a stiff headwind. The wind and the waves are against them. Also, as Mark tells us, the disciples reach the point where they're 'straining' at the oars (Mark 6:48 NIV). The Greek word translated 'straining' (*basanizo*) means 'tortured.' They reach the point where rowing becomes sheer torture, sheer agony. On top of that, as John adds, they've only traveled three or four miles (John 6:19); only halfway across the lake.

No doubt, many of us have felt that way—or perhaps some of us are feeling that way today. We've been seeking to obey Jesus, seeking to move forward in the direction he's calling us to go, but we've encountered a headwind. Circumstances have come against us, and it's become sheer torture making any headway. On top of that, we still have a long way to go and Jesus seems like he's on a distant mountain, remote and removed from our suffering. Rather than providing us with worldly comfort—rather than making our lives cozy—God has forced us out of our comfort zone and brought us to a place where we are completely powerless.

As I said, the disciples are about to find themselves in a graduate level class in The School of Faith. Things are about to go from bad to worse. Sheer physical torture is now about to be compounded with sheer emotional terror.

Matthew 14:25-27:

And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. 26 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. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."

When the disciples see Jesus walking on water, sometime between 3:00 am and 6:00 am, they initially think he's a ghost. Judging from their reaction, he isn't a friendly ghost either. He isn't like the old cartoon character Casper. The disciples are already at the end of themselves physically, and now they're at the end

of themselves emotionally. All of their resources, both physical and emotional, have been exhausted, and their situation must have seemed entirely hopeless.

One of the great enemies of faith is fear. Whenever we're out of our comfort zone, it is by definition, uncomfortable. Also, when we become uncomfortable, it can cause us to feel anxious and afraid, especially if our situation seems hopeless. As Christians, whenever we begin to feel fear, anxiety, worry, and dread, we can be sure that our faith is being tested. Or, to put it more positively, we can be sure that our faith is being given an opportunity to grow, even though it might not look, taste, smell, feel, or sound like it at the time.

This is the same perspective James encourages us to have when he says, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness" (James 1:2-3). This perspective is completely counter-intuitive, at least initially—the perspective that we should rejoice when we meet trials and difficulties. And yet, the truth is, the testing of our faith is intended to produce something good. It is intended to produce steadfastness, perseverance, and patience. It is intended to help our faith to grow and our spiritual maturity to increase.

This was the challenge facing the Israelites when they first arrived at the Promise Land. They faced the challenge of moving forward in faith or turning back in fear. As you'll recall, Moses initially sent twelve spies into the land on a reconnaissance trip—spies who returned with a report of a land flowing with milk and honey. Unfortunately, they also returned with a report of a land filled with giants and fortified cities. Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, urged the Israelites to move forward in faith, while the other ten persuaded the people to shrink back in fear. As a result of shrinking back in fear rather than moving forward in faith, the Israelites wandered for 40 years in the wilderness.

Sadly, many Christians are like this. Instead of moving forward in faith—instead of stepping out of their comfort zone and moving into difficult and potentially dangerous situations—they shrink back in fear. Instead of placing their faith in God, they fearfully seek to protect their personal comfort, eventually producing lives that are as barren and bleak as the wilderness east of the Jordan.

Thankfully, in the case of the disciples, the Lord himself intervenes with words of comfort and encouragement. The Lord declares, "Take heart; It is I. Do not be afraid"

These are essentially the same words of encouragement the Lord conveyed to Joshua as he was about to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land after their 40 years in the wilderness. As the Israelites were about to resume their walk of faith, the Lord declared to Joshua, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9). When we are afraid, we need strength and courage that comes through faith in God—faith in the One who is bigger than any of the storms, trials, giants, and fortified cities we may face.

We're beginning to see, although God gives us many wonderful moments in life, he is not in the business of maximizing our personal comfort. He is in the business of deepening our faith, of deepening our trust in him, and, whether we like it or not, adverse circumstances are often the means through which he accomplishes his purposes.

God's greater plan: encountering him

Along with deepening our faith, God's greater plan for us also involves encountering him and drawing close to him. Among other things, I believe this is what is being pictured in the following verses, where it says:

Matthew 14:28-31:

And Peter 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 and walked on the water and came to Jesus. 30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Sometimes, God forces us out of our comfort zone. He brings difficult circumstances into our lives so that we will come to the end of ourselves and recognize our need to trust in him. Other times, God will encourage us to intentionally leave our comfort zone. He will encourage us to draw close to him by stepping out in faith, by doing things that are only possible with divine assistance.

Peter wanted proof that the figure on the water was really Jesus. However, the proof he requested wasn't something safe. He didn't say, for example, "Lord, if it is you, come over here and let me have a closer look." Instead, he requested something radical. He asked Jesus to include him in something miraculous. He asked for the miraculous ability to walk on water just like Jesus.

Peter wanted to come to Jesus. He wanted to draw close to him and encounter him. In this, his heart was like David's, who declared in Psalm 27, "You have said, 'Seek my face.' My heart says to you, 'Your face, Lord, do I seek'" (Psalm 27:8). God's greater plan for us involves seeking his face and encountering him in a more profound way. It involves voluntarily and willingly longing to be close to him, even when it means stepping out of our comfort zone.

Perhaps amazingly, Jesus grants Peter's request. He doesn't say, "That's a ridiculous idea. Stay in the boat and simply believe what I said." Jesus grants Peter's request, and he grants it without rebuke and or criticism. In fact, the word "Come" seems more of an encouragement than anything else. It seems more of a loving invitation than a stern command.

Although it's hard to imagine the faith it took for Peter to step out of the boat and begin walking on the storm-tossed water, the reality is, God may sometimes encourage us to have that same radical faith. He may sometimes encourage us to step out of the boat—to step out of our comfort zone—trusting that he will give us whatever we need in order to have a more profound encounter with him. Indeed, whenever our genuine desire is to encounter God in a deeper way, God will honor that desire. As it says in Hebrews, "Without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Hebrews 11:6).

The problem for Peter, as well as for us, is that doubts often creep in. Peter became distracted by the wind and the waves—distracted by the circumstances—and when that happened, he took his eyes off Jesus. Fear and doubt are the great enemies of faith. Our fears, working hand in hand with our doubts, can pull us off track, keeping us from fulfilling God's greater plan for our lives, at least temporarily.

Thankfully, even when that occurs—even when doubts and fears pull us off track and cause us to sink—God doesn't abandon us. When we call out to him, even as we're vanishing beneath the waves, he not only hears us but also responds to us. Someone once asked Ray Stedman, "How far do you think Peter sank?" to which Ray replied, "I think there were just bubbles." Sometimes it's that way for us as well. Sometimes we sink until there are just bubbles. And yet, God graciously reaches out, grabs our hand, and pulls us to safety.

God's greater plan for our lives sometimes involves forcing us out of our comfort zone and sometimes

involves encouraging us to willingly step out of our comfort zone. God wants our faith in him to deepen, and he wants us to encounter him in a more profound way. These are of far more worth, far more value, than the maximization of worldly comfort and coziness.

God's greater plan: worshipping him

There is one more component to God's greater plan for us that I would like to highlight. Namely, God not only wants us to have deeper faith in him and a deeper encounter with him, he ultimately wants us to worship him. As the final verses in our passage declare:

Matthew 14:32-33:

And 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."

When the Magi arrived after Jesus' birth, they worshiped him (Matthew 2:11). Here, after Jesus and Peter climb into the boat and the wind ceased, the disciples worshiped him. They worshiped Jesus. The proper response to encountering God should be worship. It should be an acknowledgement of God for who he truly is and it should be an expression of the praise, honor, glory, and reverence he so rightfully deserves. This is described in Revelation 5:13-14:

And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"¹⁴ And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Worship should be our proper response to God and to God alone. However, lest we forget, Satan wants our worship as well. In fact, Satan wants us to worship him instead of God. This is what we see in the temptation in the wilderness, recorded in Matthew 4. Here, in the last of the three temptations, the devil takes Jesus up on a very tall mountain, where we are told that the devil, "... showed him [Jesus] all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me" (Matthew 4:8-9).

Satan showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their glory and promised to give Jesus those kingdoms in exchange for worship. If Jesus worshiped Satan, Satan declared that he would give him all the world's kingdoms, their glory, and presumably their comfort

and coziness. What we need to realize is this: just as Satan promised to give Jesus this world's kingdoms and comforts in exchange for worship, he will tempt us with the same promises as well. He will dangle worldly pleasures and coziness in front of us, hoping to tantalize us into drawing closer to him rather than drawing closer to the Lord.

I am not saying that Christians are to lead austere monastic lives, devoid of any pleasure or enjoyment. Rather, we are to make sure that worldly pleasures and comforts don't become our god, don't become an idol, taking the place in our lives that only God should rightfully have. As I said earlier, the values of this world are always trying to find their way into our lives, both individually and collectively, and we need to be decisive in our stand against them. We need to unequivocally declare along with Jesus, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve" (Matthew 4:10).

God has a greater plan for our lives—a plan that is far greater than the maximization of worldly comfort. God wants to deepen our faith in him, deepen our encounter with him, and deepen our worship of him. It is a plan that infinitely exceeds anything this world has to offer. It is also a plan God will accomplish. As Paul so beautifully tells us in Philippians, "he who has begun a good work will complete it" (Philippians 1:6). May we rejoice in that knowledge today, embracing whatever challenges and trials the Lord has placed before us.

Endnotes

1 Marc Shoen, Ph. D, *Your Survival Instinct Is Killing You: Retrain Your Brain to Conquer Fear* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2013), 17.