

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

MATTHEW 14:22-36

THE picture at which we are now to look stands in remarkable contrast to three which have immediately preceded it. All the outstanding facts noticed in them are revealed by contrast more clearly in this story.

The first picture ended with the words, “**He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief;**” but in this picture we see Him working one of His mightiest works.

In the second picture we saw Him hiding Himself from a man who was afraid of Him, imagining that He was an apparition; in this picture the disciples also said, “**It is a spirit;**” they also being filled with fear; but instead of hiding Himself from them, He came nearer, and said, “**Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.**”

In the third case we saw that He declined to be crowned upon the conditions which men desired; but in this picture we see Him holding the reins, and swaying the sceptre, and manipulating all events. Here we see Him the crowned Lord, in the midst of His own Kingdom.

It was a poor Kingdom, measured by all the standards of men, just a frail fisherman’s rowing boat, in the midst of a storm-tossed sea; a boat that the men who knew it best were absolutely failing to manage. Nevertheless, that little boat in the midst of the sea, that handful of men, that One Lord and Master; constituted God’s established Kingdom in the world at that moment.

- His own had refused Him at Nazareth.
- The reigning authority, Herod, was seeking to find Him, probably that he might deal with Him as he had dealt with John.
- The multitudes would have been glad to have Him if He would have come to the throne on the basis of feeding them without work.

He had left Nazareth, He had turned His back on Herod, and He had declined the Kingdom; and here He was in the midst of His Kingdom in that little boat, in which all God’s enterprises were embarked.

If we had known it at the moment, and had stood on the seashore, and had looked, we should have been as much afraid about God’s Kingdom in the world as we are sometimes still.

We should have imagined that the next wave would have engulfed the little boat, as we sometimes still think the next wave will destroy God's program and God's purpose. So it is well for us to look back at the actual picture of Christ's Kingdom at that moment; and then to see how far it has spread, and to observe it in contrast with other things, that we may learn lessons of permanent value for our own help.

Notice first, then, the contrast between this picture and the other three a little more fully.

First, **“He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief.”**

Why was it that here He could do such a mighty work? Because here faith reposed in Him. You say that it was frail faith, and faulty faith, and failing faith. Yes, but it was simple faith, and convinced faith. Faith may often falter, and yet never finally fail. Faith may often tremble, and yet still continue to be faith. Faith does not always mean the fully instructed intellect grasping the whole fact. The faith that saves is a personal confidence in Christ. And that is what these men on the boat possessed. He came from the loneliness of the mountain, and prayer, to men who believed in Him.

And again we have a revelation of uttermost importance that we sterilize the power of the Christ when we are merely critical in His presence, but we create an atmosphere in which He can do His mighty works, when our faith simply and quietly takes hold upon Him.

It is the difference between the Nazareth picture, and the sea picture.

In the one case, we see men who thought they knew all about Him and refused to accept the things that astonished them; and because of their criticism He could do nothing. But He came to these bewildered, blundering men who had come to Him, and stilled the sea, and hushed the wind and made His power manifest.

Now look again at the next contrast; and notice the difference between the case of His hiding and the case of His revelation.

On both occasions men took Him for something supernatural, strange, or, to use that very expressive Scotch word, uncanny. In the one case we see a man who was afraid of the mystic, who expressed himself imperfectly, hardly believing what he said for we cannot really think Herod believed it was John the Baptist; it was just an exclamation of a panic-stricken conscience; from that man He hid Himself, because he had deliberately and positively shut his eyes in the presence of light, and stopped his ears in the presence of truth, and sold his soul to keep a false oath made to a dancing wanton.

But on the other hand we see men who, in spite of all their failure, in spite of all their faltering, in spite of all their shortcoming, were true to the light they had received, and to them He revealed Himself. At that very moment they were doing a difficult thing. He had sent them in a boat to the other side of the sea.

Matthew tells the story with artless simplicity. **“The ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary.”**

Think of it for a moment, and what it reveals. What should we have done under like circumstances? The probability is that, being as these men were, accustomed to the storms on Galilee, well able to manage the boat, we should have turned the boat round and run with the wind, for all the difficulty came out of the fact that the wind was contrary. It is not easy to turn a boat against the wind, but even that is easier than continuing to proceed against the wind.

Why did they not do that? Because He had told them **“to go before him unto the other side;”** and it was their loyalty to Him which kept them in the place of peril. He had pointed to the other shore, and those blundering, frail, faulty men; men so much like ourselves that we are bound to love them when we read of them, were at any rate true enough to what they knew, to keep the prow pointing to the shore He indicated for them.

Consequently He came to them, and when their hearts were sick with fear in the presence of the apparition, with splendid cheerfulness He spoke out of the mystery and said, **“Be of good cheer; It is I; be not afraid.”**

Finally notice the contrast between this story, and the story of His refusal to be crowned. We have dwelt at length with His refusal to be crowned as indicating the perpetual principle that He will never be crowned upon the basis of supplying material things. He will supply material things, but we must crown Him for other reasons. Now here were men over whom He exercised the sway of a great Kingship.

Where is the contrast?

First, they were obedient men. Nay, we may go further back, they were, first, surrendered men.

They were the men who constituted His Kingdom up to that moment, not the crowds that He fed. They were obedient men; they had set the prow of their vessel in the direction He had indicated. They were distressed men, distressed by the waves and the contrary wind.

As the story goes forward, we see them to be men strangely perplexed by His coming, by this apparition. And yet as we watch them a little longer, we see they were men who out of the midst of their perplexity, when suddenly light broke upon them, were venturesome. Peter was the spokesman again; just a little in front of the others in the matter; he said, **“Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water.”**

In the next place they were men who were liable to fail even in their venture of faith.

Peter came and walked upon the water. Some men criticize Peter and say he had no right to do it, that it was presumption. Christ said, **“Come,”** and He never invites us to do anything that is presumptuous. Some pictures represent Peter as leaving the boat and beginning to sink at once. No. **“Peter . . . walked on the water, to go to Jesus.”**

He did the thing he wanted to do; he made the venture of faith, and achieved the victory of faith. And yet we see that he failed also. There was a moment when he took his eyes off his Lord and fixed them upon the surrounding circumstances, and he went down. To do that is always to sink.

And yet what is the last thing recorded? They worshipped Jesus.

“They that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God.”

It was not a Kingdom of perfect souls, but it was a Kingdom of souls that had put their trust in Him, and over whom He was reigning in order to make them perfect, patiently leading them on, waiting for them, halting by them, attempting to lead them by rapid stages, for **“He . . . would have passed by them,”** says one of the Evangelists.

He tried their faith, but when faith was unequal to the strain He turned to them and delivered them. It is a perfect picture of His Kingdom as it is to-day. These were the men who had crowned Him upon the basis of the essential truth He had presented to them, who had crowned Him upon the basis of the spiritual within them. And He delivered them in the hour of material difficulty.

Let us look at this story from another standpoint.

If in its setting it is a revelation of essential truth concerning His Kingdom by a contrast with the other pictures, then it remains for evermore a picture of Jesus in relation to His Church. There may be many applications, but we will confine ourselves to one.

Here we have the revelation of our Lord’s relation to His people in the times of difficulty and trouble and peril, which come to them because of their loyalty to His supreme will.

One would not wish to take this story away from any tempest-tossed soul whatever may be the nature of the tempest; and yet it would not appear that this message is to those who may be in sorrow or in difficulty or in the midst of tempest as the result of their own disobedience. It seems to exclude them from this story, but it does not exclude them from the Christ. Whatever difficulty we have found our way into and we have found our way into more difficulties through disobedience than obedience He is always there to help us out.

Peter got into difficulty when he sank, through failure, and the Lord was there **“immediately.”**

It is one of those words which ought to be printed in gold, and hung up in view of all faltering souls - **“IMMEDIATELY!”**

He then said to him, **“O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?”**

One would rather have missed the touch of His hand, and have missed the rebuke. But if we fall as Peter fell, and sink, thank God for the quick hand of our Lord, which is always there.

But the essential values of this are for obedient souls in difficulty.

First we see the perfect picture of the relationship of Christ to His people to-day.

When this story opens He was on the mountain alone with God. It was one of those rare and beautiful and brief occasions in which He broke away from the pressure of the crowd and was alone with God. It was His place of rest, of joy, of quietness, of perfect peace. His disciples were on the sea, where He put them, in the place of peril. He was in the place of calm restfulness; they were in the place where the storm might sweep at any moment.

Such is the contrast between the attitude of Jesus our Master now, and ourselves. He has reached the right hand of His Father. All of us are on the sea. There are some who know nothing of storms. Thank God for every sunshiny day, with blue sky and sea; but the storm may come. That is the first contrast, He in the place of rest, we in the place of toil; He in the place of perfect calm, we in the place where the hurricanes may sweep at any moment.

What next? The storm which came to Gennesaret was one of those hurricanes about which we know so little, sweeping down upon the men ere they knew it, tossing wave upon wave, the whole sky black with a sudden blackness, and they, in imminent peril of their lives. Where was their Lord?

First, notice that He had never lost sight of them, though He was on the mountain and they were on the sea.

So now, He will have even His rest and communion broken in upon if His own people are in trouble, and He will never rest perfectly in high heaven so long as His own are tempest-tossed upon the sea of the little while. He turned His back upon the mountain, and treading its slopes, and crossing the intervening space, He put His feet upon the waters, and mark this, as He went to them, in overtaking them, He went in the way they had gone. He did not meet them as from the other side; He followed them. He went to them over the very waters that threatened to engulf them, easily Master of them all; through the very wind that was contrary to them, it seeming to open its doors as He came with easy, quiet majesty.

Is this not a revelation that should give us peace?

The billows perhaps are breaking upon the frail craft of some soul, some child of God, and all the storm that is being experienced is because he is where God has put him. But he is in the path of obedience and he knows it; no one can rob him of that sweet consciousness and conviction. But Christ does not seem to be near; He seems to be away in the day of tempest, and trial, and storm.

That soul says, I was in a storm once before, and He was on the vessel and I could wake Him, but He is not here to-day, this is different. Ah, but He knows, He is coming. It is too dark for you to see Him yet, but He is coming. He cannot leave you alone to perish. And mark this, He is coming over the very waves you are most afraid of. The very waves that threaten to buffet and break you to pieces are the pavement for His blessed feet.

But you say, it is not the waves, it is the contrary wind; if I could only turn round and run with the wind. But He is coming through that wind, and as the waves become adamant at the touch of His feet, the wind loses its power to hinder, when the majesty of His presence confronts, it.

But look again at our picture. The darkest part of the dark night to those men was not the darkness of the clouds, not the terror of the wind, not the threatening billows; the most terrible thing in all that night was the phantom.

They forgot all about the storm as they peered over the side of the vessel at the strange phantom approaching them over the waters. They were for the most part rough-handed fishermen. They knew the use of the oar. The storm was more than usually severe; they could fight that, but they could not fight a ghost.

The most terrible troubles that come to us are the unexplained, and the unexplainable things.

There are troubles very severe, but they are common to all men. We expect them, they must come presently. But once or twice in the course of a lifetime, there come to every man and woman days of great horror of darkness, that have no explanation.

“Mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread! hath lifted up his heel against me.”

That is an almost unsurpassed horror of darkness. It may be you have never known it, it may be you never will; God grant you never may. It was trouble inexplicable that came to them that night. As they strained in their looking out over the side of the ship at this strange apparition, this phantom of the night, suddenly it took voice and said, **“Be of good cheer; it is I.”**

That is a part of the story where exposition fails. We cannot explain it; it is so simple a story, we are so familiar with it.

But what is the spiritual value here for a tempest-tossed soul?

That almost invariably to the soul that is really trusting and true, the darkest hour is the dawning of the clearest day; the direst sorrow of the heart is that out of which the chief joy of life comes; the most brutal bruising of the vintage is that out of which the finest wine comes forth.

The phantom is the Master.

The hours that some of us would be most loath to have undone in our past are the hours of our greatest sorrows. It was in them we found Him; it was in them we heard the infinite music saying, **“Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.”**

We may do without that yesterday of sunshine, but not without that day before, of shadow. It was out of that He came close to us. We have all sorts of little proverbs, some of them very true, and some of them very foolish; but a proverb we make great use of is, “Man’s extremity is God’s opportunity.”

Quite true! But let us revise it thus “Man’s extremity is man’s opportunity for finding God!”

It is in the hour of greatest heart-ache that we find Him. Be still, sad heart, if it be possible; wait, rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him, and presently you will look back to the day of your unutterable agony, and you will say, For that day above all days His name be praised; out of that darkness came the light; out of that bitterness came the sweetness; out of that mysterious phantom chilling my heart and well-nigh stopping my pulses, came my Lord, warming my heart and making every fiber pulsate with new joy and new enthusiasm.

Let us take one thing more out of this story.

Matthew says, They gladly received Him on board, and they crossed over. Mark says, He came on board, and they crossed over, they finished the journey. But John says something else, “**They willingly received Him into the ship; and immediately the ship was at the land whither they went.**”

What are we to understand by that word of John? Are we to understand there was a miracle wrought there; that the ship in the midst of the sea finished the journey by the annihilation of time and space? In our eagerness to retain all the miracles we need not be eager to read miracles into things that are not miracles. John the mystic, John the lover, John the man who talks most about fellowship says, When He came on board we were there directly. Did not John go as far as the rest? “Immediately!” Every youth and maiden who is in love understands that. A long journey may be covered in what seems but a few moments. “**immediately the ship was at the land whither they went.**”

The storms are about us yet, and He is trying our faith by being absent from us, or so it seems. We are never far from Him nor He from us. He is coming over the waters and through the wind. Presently in the company of the King, we shall be home, and we shall hear His voice more clearly and see His face perfectly.

O that God may help us to be so true to Him that He may be able to correct all our faltering and failing! May we be in His Kingdom, and He our King.

~ end of chapter 43 ~

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