

# The Storm Stilled

*The authority of Christ over creation and the question that begins discipleship*

The disciples' problem was never the storm — it was not knowing who was asleep in the boat with them.

Matthew 8:23-27

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## Scripture — Matthew 8:23-27

*And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?" Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. And the men marveled, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?"*

Free translation for study purposes — check against your preferred Bible version

## Historical Context

The Sea of Galilee is a freshwater lake about 210 meters below sea level, set in a basin ringed by hills. That geography makes it notorious among fishermen: the cold air descending from the Golan heights and Mount Hermon meets the warm, dense air of the basin and unleashes violent, sudden storms that can turn a calm surface into a wall of waves within minutes. Several of the disciples in that boat — Peter, Andrew, James, John — were fishermen by trade, men who had spent their lives on those waters and knew how to read the sky. The detail matters: the panic that seizes them on board is not the fear of frightened tourists, but of seasoned professionals who recognized a storm far bigger than their expertise. The typical fishing boat of the period — one was dug out of the mud of that very shore and is now on display in Israel — was about eight meters long: cramped quarters, with no deck to shield anyone from a sea that "covered" the vessel.

## Cultural Context

For the Hebrew imagination, the sea was not merely dangerous water: it was the symbol of chaos, of the abyss, of that which threatens to swallow up and undo all order. Creation, in Genesis 1, begins with the Spirit of God hovering over the face of the formless waters, and proceeds with God separating and restraining those waters. Throughout the whole Old Testament, to master the sea is the exclusive signature of the Creator — no hero, no king, no prophet commands the waves. That is why Jewish eyes would not have read the scene as a simple rescue at sea. When someone, standing in a boat on the verge of sinking, orders the sea to be still and the sea obeys, the category that imposes itself is not "strong man" but God. Add to this the cultural expectation of the Messiah: people awaited a political liberator, a new David with a sword — not One whose authority reached the very elements of creation. The disciples' closing question ("what sort of man is this?") is born precisely from the collision between what they saw and the categories they had available.

## Theological Context

Matthew arranges chapters 8 and 9 as a deliberate sequence of signs that widen, domain by domain, the authority of Christ: over ceremonial uncleanness (the leper), over the distance and flesh of a Gentile (the centurion's servant), over disease in a Jewish home (Peter's mother-in-law) and, now, over nature itself (the raging sea). It is the same progression that, a few verses earlier, led a foreign centurion to say "only say the word" — and the comparison is intentional. There is also a detail that sets Matthew's account apart from Mark's and Luke's: in theirs, Jesus stills the storm and only afterward confronts the disciples' faith; in Matthew, the order is reversed — he first asks "why are you afraid, O you of little faith?" and only then rises against the sea. The reversal is not accidental. Matthew wants the lesson about faith to come before the spectacle of the miracle: the focus is not the calm that arrives, but the heart that trembles even with the One whom the Psalms call Lord of the waters on board.

## Exposition

The scene opens with a contrast the narrative makes no effort to soften: while the sea rises and the boat is covered by the waves, "but he was asleep." Jesus' sleep is, first, a mark of his real humanity — he was exhausted, sleeping on a cushion in the stern, as Mark records. But that same sleep is, for the attentive reader, the serenity of One who has nothing to fear from the sea: the Creator resting in the midst of his own creation in fury. The disciples wake him with a cry that mixes faith and despair: "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" They at least ran to the right person — but they ran with the wrong heart, convinced that death was nearer than the power of the One asleep three steps away.

Jesus' reply dismantles the logic of panic before it dismantles the storm: "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?" "Little faith" (in Greek, *oligopistoi*) is not the absence of faith — it is real faith, but shrunken, which recognizes Jesus as Lord and yet imagines him too small for the size of the crisis. Only after exposing the heart does he rise and "rebuked the winds and the sea." The verb is precise and freighted: *rebuke* is the word the Old Testament uses for God's action against the chaos of the waters. And "there was a great calm" — not the gradual easing that any natural storm would show, but the immediate and total silence of a sea that recognizes the voice of its owner. The miracle is not merely in the wind ceasing; it is in the sea *obeying a word*, as all creation obeyed the word in the beginning.

The episode ends not with an explanation but with a question: "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?" It is the right question — and it is where the study truly begins. To answer it, one must open the Scripture those men carried in their hearts and discover who, according to it, commands the sea.

## Christ Revealed

The question "what sort of man is this?" already comes with its answer embedded for anyone who knows the Psalms — because the whole of Scripture insists that only One masters the sea. At creation, the Spirit of God hovers over the waters and God sets a limit to the abyss: "Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed" (Job 38:11). Psalm 107 is almost the script of the scene — sailors in despair, "he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed" (Psalm 107:29). "You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them" (Psalm 89:9). So it was at the Red Sea, when "the waters saw you, O God, they were afraid" (Psalm 77:16), and so it is in the promise: the arm of the Lord "dried up the sea" (Isaiah 51:10). In none of these passages is the one who commands the waters a man — it is always YHWH. And there is a linguistic hinge that closes the case: the verb Matthew uses for Jesus, that he "rebuked" the sea, is exactly the verb the Old Testament reserves for God. "He rebukes the sea and makes it dry" (Nahum 1:4); "he rebuked the Red Sea, and it became dry" (Psalm 106:9). When Jesus rebukes the waves and they fall silent, the very vocabulary of the scene declares it: here acts the God who rebukes the chaos. Christ does not do something *like* what God does — he does what only God does, because he is God.

This is why the disciples were in a classroom, not merely in a boat. They came out of the episode without the finished answer, but with the right question on their lips — and that question is the seed of discipleship. The recognition that begins in embryo there will mature: in Matthew 14, after Jesus walks on the sea — the sea again, authority over the waters again — those same men finally worship him, saying "truly you are the Son of God"; and the confession reaches its climax on Peter's lips in Matthew 16: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." The boat was the room where Christ was teaching them, sign after sign, to see who had always been with them.



And here the text descends to its deepest floor. The same Lord who sets a limit to chaos — "thus far shall you come, and no farther" — would face a storm he would deliberately *not* still. Not wind and waves, but the full fury of God's judgment against sin, crashing down upon him at the cross. Before that storm, the Lord of the waters did not say "peace, be still." He fell silent. He let the tempest break over himself to the very end, and went down into the abyss — into death, into the "deep" the sea had always symbolized — and he went down willingly, into the chaos, so that his people would never be swallowed by it. At Calvary no word of calm came from the Father; Christ drank the whole storm, without a crumb of relief, precisely so that to us he could say "peace." And then the resurrection closes the arc: the One who descended to the lowest depth emerged — the waters could not hold the Lord of the waters — and now he guarantees that his own reach the other shore. The small crossing of that night becomes a figure of the greater crossing: Christ brings us safe and sound to the beach of the new creation. Even Job 38 takes on a second sense: God set no limit at all on the wrath poured out upon the Son, precisely so that there would be a limit — a safe boundary, a firm shore — for us. The believer's fear is not denied; it is disarmed. The storms of your life are real, but never again condemning, because the Lord of the sea has already gone to the bottom for you and come back.

## Cross References

**Genesis 1:2** — The Spirit of God hovers over the waters: from the very beginning, mastering the chaos of the waters is the work of the Creator.

**Job 38:8-11** — "Thus far shall you come, and no farther" — God sets a limit to the sea; at the cross he sets no limit to the wrath upon the Son so that there might be a limit for us.

**Psalms 107:23-30** — The script of the scene: sailors in despair, and "he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed."

**Psalms 89:9** — "You rule the raging of the sea" — the authority Jesus exercises is ascribed, in the Psalm, to YHWH alone.

**Nahum 1:4** — "He rebukes the sea and makes it dry" — the same verb Matthew uses for Jesus rebuking the waves.

**Matthew 14:32-33** — The sea again: after he walks on the waters, the disciples worship him — "truly you are the Son of God."

**Matthew 16:15-16** — The question "what sort of man is this?" matures into Peter's confession: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

## Applications

The easy reading of this text — "have enough faith and Jesus will calm the storms of your life" — is precisely the one Matthew himself dismantles by reversing the order: the question is not the size of your storm, but who you know is in the boat. Fear, here, functions as a revealer: it exposes what we actually believe about Christ when circumstances close in. The disciples were never in real danger for a single moment — the Lord sovereign over the sea was three steps away, asleep. Their "little faith" was not unbelief; it was a true faith that imagined Jesus too small for the size of the crisis. It is worth contrasting with the previous study: the centurion, a Gentile, at a distance, trusted that a single word was enough; the disciples, pressed close to Christ inside the same boat, gave way to panic. Faith is not physical proximity nor length of acquaintance — it is rightly recognizing who he is. The question this text leaves us is not "is your faith big enough?" but "on whom, exactly, is your faith resting when the water starts coming in?" And the pastoral answer is not the promise that there will be no storms, but the presence — and the finished work — of the One who has already gone to the bottom for you and come back.

## Reflection Questions

1. What did this text reveal about Christ?
2. What did this text reveal about me?
3. In what areas of my life do I, like the disciples, recognize Jesus as Lord and yet imagine him too small for my crisis?
4. Has my fear in the face of difficulty been exposing what I really believe about the authority of Christ?
5. What would change today if I lived convinced that the Lord who masters the sea has already gone to the bottom for me and is carrying me to the other shore?

# Spiritual Journal

Hoje Deus revelou...

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O que aprendi sobre Cristo?

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O que preciso entregar ao Senhor?

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Como este texto confrontou meu coração?

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Escreva uma oração.

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## Prayer

Lord Jesus, you are the One who sets a limit to chaos and rebukes the sea with a word — the same One who, at the cross, fell silent and let the storm of wrath break over you to bring me safe and sound to the other shore. Forgive my little faith, which recognizes you as Lord and yet imagines you small before my storms. When the water starts coming in, teach me to remember who is in the boat with me. Still my heart as you stilled the sea, not because the storms will vanish, but because you have already gone to the bottom for me. Amen.

## Further Reading

**The Gospel of Matthew** — R. T. France

**The Cross of Christ** — John Stott

**Knowing God** — J. I. Packer