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March 8, 2026

REAL DEVOTION: MATTHEW 15:1-11,16-20

Introductory Activity

Prior to the group time, list some of the phobias on the Wikipedia page https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_phobias on the board (You could also call them out and ask the group to answer you. The reason I list them is that some of them are hard to pronounce.)

Discuss: As the group time begins, ask the group to guess what fears the phobias relate to.

Explain: People have a variety of fears. Some of rational because there are objects, situations, and animals that are truly harmful. Other fears are irrational and result from trauma or childhood experiences. According to the American Psychological Association, “when people are fearful of something, they tend to avoid the feared object, activities, or situation.” One form of therapy used by mental health professionals is called exposure therapy. “In this form of therapy, psychologists create a safe environment in which to ‘expose’ individuals to the things they fear and avoid. The exposure to feared objects, activities, or situations in a safe environment helps reduce fear and avoidance.”¹ While any type of therapy should be done in consultation with a mental health professional, we can glean some insight from such forms of therapy. Some fears are irrational, and exposure will help a person overcome their irrational fear. Other fears are reasonable, but exposure might help a person learn to master the situation and overcome their fear.

Summarize and Transition: In today’s lesson, Jesus’ disciples are going to experience a little exposure therapy. Our story picks up at the end of a long and remarkable day. Matthew chapter 14 provides an account of John the Baptist’s execution by Herod. Upon hearing of the event, Jesus wasn’t afraid, but He “withdrew from there by boat to a remote place to be alone.” (v. 13) The crowds, however, followed Him. Upon seeing “a large crowd, [He] had compassion on them, and healed their sick.” (v. 14) After a long day of this, the disciples urged Him to send the crowd away to find food. Instead of doing so, Jesus challenged His disciples to feed them. When they could find only a few loaves of bread and a small amount of fish, Jesus proceeded to multiply the food so that it provided enough to feed “five thousand men, besides women and children.” (v. 21) Our lesson picks up at the conclusion of the miraculous picnic.

1. JESUS’S PRESENCE (MATT. 14:22-27)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 14:22-27.

Explain: As this passage begins, we see that Jesus finally gets what He came for. He had been seeking solitude to begin with. Now that He has sated the physical desires of the people, He retreats to the mountain. But first, he must send the disciples on their way. It was probably between 7 and 9 pm when he did so. Before we examine the experience of the disciples, we should take a moment to examine the experience of Jesus. He had suffered the loss of a friend and colleague in ministry. He just wanted to get away for a bit. Instead, the needs of the people caused Him to delay satisfying His own needs for a time. But when the opportunity came, He immediately dismissed His disciples and the large crowd. He then made His way up the mountain to pray.

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Matthew* (Preaching)
- *New American Commentary: Matthew* (NAC)
- *Exalting Christ in Matthew* (Exalting)
- *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Matthew 14-28* (ACCS)
- *The King Has Come* (Spurgeon)

¹ www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/patients-and-families/exposure-therapy (accessed 2/13/26).

Courage: Matthew 14:22-33

There He stayed and prayed until early the next morning. Before we move on to discuss fear, we should note the importance of solitude and prayer.

Discuss: Both solitude and prayer are ancient spiritual disciplines of the Christian faith. Why do you think solitude and prayer are important for the Christian walk?

Explain: Solitude is more than being alone. Solitude is being alone *and* undistracted (by your phone, your thoughts, your plans). Christian solitude is being *thoughtfully* alone with the Lord. This is hard in our busy and connected lives, but it has *always* been challenging. The 4th-century Christian leader John Chrysostom remarked, "The wilderness is the mother of silence." (Chrysostom, ACC, 11) And the 19th-century London megachurch leader Charles Spurgeon writes, "We cannot afford to be always in company." (Spurgeon, 195) Note Spurgeon's words. He says, we cannot *afford* to always be surrounded by others. Whether that "company" be the physical presence of others or the chatter of the TV, the reels on our phones, or the demands of those behind our to-do list, it *costs* us something to be in their presence, and he says we can't afford the cost.

Discuss: What are some ways we can practice solitude?

Explain: The 4th-century bishop reminds us that there is no better place to find silence than in the wilderness. If you can't get to the mountains, you can load up the john boat and head for the lake, lace up your sneakers for a walk in the woods or park, or simply hide your phone and sit quietly on the back porch. We must find time to sit quietly with the Lord and just be. But while Jesus is quietly connecting with the Father, the storms of life still rage.

Reread: Matthew 14:24 (See Notes Box.)

Explain: Here we see the disciples experiencing everyday challenges. While the disciples made their way across the lake, a squall rose up around them. Now, one thing we should note is that the disciples were probably not too frightened by the storm. Many of them were experienced fishermen and knew how to handle these everyday storms (c.f. Spurgeon, 197). In another instance, we see them terribly afraid while facing a "violent storm" (see Matthew 8:23ff), but we get no indication that they are extremely fearful in this instance. They were, however, struggling in what we might call an everyday-fearful situation. You know these kinds of situations. They are not so much scary as they are stressful. Like the disciples, we have to simply put our heads down and row in order to stay afloat. We struggle against the waves of life *so that we don't* find ourselves in a truly fearful place. That is when Jesus shows up.

Read: Matthew 14:25-26 (See Notes Box.)

Notes:

Matthew 14:24
"Meanwhile, the boat was already some distance from land, battered by the waves, because the wind was against them."

Matthew 14:25-26
²⁴ Meanwhile, the boat was already some distance from land, battered by the waves, because the wind was against them. ²⁵ Jesus came toward them walking on the sea very early in the morning.

Courage: Matthew 14:22-33

It was probably between 3 and 6 am at this point. The disciples have been struggling all night, and Jesus comes to them walking on the water. Upon seeing Him, the disciples experience a supernatural fear. It was really an irrational fear based on superstition. It was an irrational fear, but a fear nonetheless. We can note that when we are stressed and in stressful situations, fear can come upon us from irrational places. Financial stresses, family stresses, and work stresses can cause you to fear that all is lost, your family is going to bail on you, or someone is out to take your job. These irrational fears can cause us act irrationally. The answer to the disciples' problems shows up, and they respond with even more fear. In response to their fear, Jesus speaks up.

Read: Matthew 14:27

Here, Jesus makes a remarkable statement that might pass us by. First, He tells them to "have courage." Then He reveals the reason they should have courage. In our English translation, we read that Jesus next says, "It is I." We might read that as, "Have courage. Jesus, your miracle-working rabbi, is here." But Jesus is saying more than that. The Greek words He uses are identical to the Greek words used in the Greek translation of the Bible in Jesus' day. Exodus 3:14 is the passage in which God reveals His name to Moses. He says, "I AM." That is the same thing Jesus is saying. He is not saying "I am" here. He is saying, "I AM is here." Jesus calms their fear. Don't be stressed by the waves. Don't be fearful of some imaginary ghost because the God who delivered the nation from Egypt, the God who parted the Red Sea, the God of all creation, is here.

Summarize Transition: This passage shows two things. First, we see the importance of rest and solitude. If Jesus needs solitude when facing the challenges of life (the death of His friend), we need it to. Next, we see that everyday challenges can lead to a fearful response when we face unexpected challenges (like the "ghost"). When this happens, we need to remember that Jesus is right there, ready to help us. Matthew is about to give a story within this broader story. But let's take a moment to flash forward to what Jesus intended to do before Peter interrupts the flow. Matthew tells us in verse 32, "When they got into the boat, the wind ceased." That was Jesus' plan all along. He cried out over the waves, "Have courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." The next thing He planned to do was get in the boat and calm the sea. When we face fearful situations, Jesus wants to get in our boat and calm the storms.

That is what He is going to do, but first Peter makes a request. Let's look at that.

2. JESUS'S INVITATION (MATT. 14:28-30)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 14:28-30.

Explain: Let's walk through this passage and the next and glean some application for our lives.

Notes:

"The phrase 'I AM' in the Greek version of the Old Testament--the Septuagint (LXX)--is *ego eimi*. This is precisely the wording Jesus uses in Matt 14:27 when He says, 'It is I.'" (Exalting, 195 note 30)

"He *says* his identity (that's the bit about the 'I am'), but he also *shows* his identity, obviously by walking on the 'the water' or 'the sea'." (Preaching, 411)

"Jesus *says* he is God incarnate, and Jesus *shows* he is God incarnate." (Preaching, 412)

First, we see that **Peter Trusts in the Strength of I AM**. When our Bibles translate Peter's words, "Lord, if it's you," It might better be translated "Lord, *since it is you*." It appears that he believed Jesus' implied statement when He said, "I AM has arrived." We do not know why Peter asked to come to Jesus instead of inviting Jesus into the boat, but we do know Peter made an audacious request. He requested that the Lord "command" him to act **based on the power of the Lord**. Don't miss that. He did not ask Jesus to simply do something. He asked Jesus to command him **to act on his trust in the Lord**.

Application: We can glean an initial application from this account. **We Should Trust in the Strength of I AM**. When we truly understand that I AM is present in our lives and in our storms, we can have courage. We can have the courage to make audacious requests.

Discuss: What are some courageous and audacious requests we might make of the Lord?

We might pray something like: "Lord save so-and-so; Lord bless this big move I am making in my business; Lord double the size of my small group; Lord use me to change my community; Lord enlarge your Kingdom by enlarging our local church; Lord heal my child of drug addiction. Lord, I know you are the great I AM, not just my personal redeemer. Since you are God, I invite you to show up big in my life. **And Lord, involve me in Your great act.**" That is what Peter does. Peter trusts in the strength of I AM, causing him to make a courageous and audacious request of the Lord. However, Peter had not acted on that courage. That happens when he gets out of the boat.

The second thing this passage reveals is that **Peter Experienced the Strength of I AM**. After Peter makes his request of the Lord, the Lord tells him to come on. Now the Bible does not say this, but as a person who enjoys seeing people take bold moves for Jesus, I imagine Jesus had a sly grin on His face. I think He knows what Peter is about to experience, and I think He knows it is going to rock Peter's world. He might have been thinking, "Oh, this is going to be fun. Peter is about to experience something he never could have imagined and something no one has ever experienced." And Peter does. He swings one leg over the edge of the boat. We might imagine him looking back at the other guys in excitement, but I don't think he does. I think he keeps his gaze firmly fixed on Jesus. Now, it's time to really exercise his courage. He has stated it. He is moving in the right direction. Now he swings that other leg over and steps out onto the water. He is experiencing the strength and power of I AM, and he walks toward Jesus. It is truly amazing.

Application: We can glean another application point from this account. **We can Experience the Strength of I AM**. We can intellectually and spiritually know that God is powerful. We can even invite God to do great things. We can be so bold as to ask God to involve us in His word. But it is not until we swing our legs over the edge and get out of the boat that we experience the strength and power of God. Jesus was not going to walk

Notes:

"He believes that he can do by the will of the Master what the latter could do by nature." (Jerome, ACC 13)

"Confidence in Christ; courage by means of Christ--that's faith." (Preaching, 416)

on the water *for* Peter. He was going to empower Peter to do so. “Lord save...” “Lord bless...” “Lord grow...” “Lord do...” He responds, “I can. Now, you do your part.” If we want the Lord to save a lost friend or family member, we must share the gospel with them. We must walk with them through their storms. If they turn a deaf ear to our words, we need to find a way for them to hear the gospel afresh. If we want the Lord to bless our business venture, we must ethically begin to do our part to work the business. If we want the Lord to grow our small group and grow our church, we must do our part. Get out of the boat.

But don’t miss the reality of Peter’s new situation. By trusting in I AM, Peter put himself in a *very* dangerous situation. Yes, he is walking on the water in the power of Jesus, but the storm is still raging, and the wind is still blowing. When we step out in courageous faith, we are stepping into a storm.

The third thing we see in the passage is that **Peter Experienced the Strength of the Winds**. Peter is doing exactly what Jesus commanded him to do. Nevertheless, the storm rages around him. Waves are crashing. The wind is pushing against him. His face is getting soaked by the rain. Now, Peter doesn’t have to worry about that. He simply needs to keep his attention on Jesus and keep walking in the direction Jesus has for him to walk. The waves can’t drag him under. The wind can’t push him over. The rain might be uncomfortable, but it can’t stop him. Jesus will enable him to accomplish his task. However, Peter takes his eyes off Jesus, the source of his power. He begins to worry about the storm, waves, wind, and rain. At that moment, he *begins* to sink. At this point, some of the commentators on this passage make use of Peter’s name to make a joke. They say things like, he sank like a rock. But this is one of those situations where trying to be funny actually distracts from the message of the passage. Matthew doesn’t say that Peter sank like a rock. He says, “beginning to sink he cried out.” I don’t know how this looked, but I imagine that Peter begins to look around at the storm and becomes distracted from the power source before him. Maybe with each subsequent step, he is a little deeper in the water. He takes one step, and his feet are under the water. With the next step, it’s his ankles. The next step finds the water above his shin. He is *beginning* to go under the water.

Application: We can glean another application point from this passage. When we follow Jesus into a situation where His power is necessary, **We Will Experience the Strength of the Winds**. Following Jesus can put us in dangerous situations. We might look around and *think* we are in danger, but we are not. When we are following Jesus in a place where only His power can sustain us, we cannot take our eyes off him. If we do, we might experience what I described as Peter’s situation. With every step we go a little more under the water. It might not happen suddenly. We might not sink like a rock, but if we take our focus off Jesus and focus on the storm, we will *begin* to sin. That is when we should do as Peter did. We should cry out, “Lord, save me!” When Peter does that, he experiences something else. Let’s look at the next passage.

3. JESUS’S RESPONSE (MATT. 14:31-33)

Notes:

Matthew 12:11

He replied to them, “Who among you, if he had a sheep that fell into a pit on the Sabbath, wouldn’t take hold of it and lift it out?”

“He points out the inconsistency in the oral law, which permits the rescue of an animal from a pit (e.g., *b. Sabb.* 128b) but not the healing of an individual whose life is not possibly in danger (e.g., *m. Yoma* 8:6—contra the Qumran sectarians, who rectified this inconsistency by prohibiting both actions—CD 11:13–14).” (NAC, 198)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 14:31-33.

Explain: When Peter cried out, the Lord acted. There was no delay. Jesus reached out and took hold of him. Also, take note that Peter had walked far enough so that Jesus was near enough to catch him. Now we see that **Peter Trusts in the Strong Arm of the Lord**. Take note that Peter followed the Lord's instructions and, in Jesus' power, was successful. He *did* walk on water! Then Peter took his eyes off Jesus and began to sink. He then calls out to Jesus, and Jesus rescues him. **Then he begins to succeed again**. In the strong arms of Jesus, he proceeds to walk back to the boat! On the way back to the boat, Jesus says, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" I don't think this was a great reprimand. Peter had not sinned. He had not denied Christ. Jesus was not dressing Peter down. It seems more like, "Dude, you were walking on water! Why did you turn your attention from me to the world? Why did you suddenly doubt that I could sustain you?" Peter was lacking in faith, but a lack of faith is not no faith (c.f. Preaching, 415). He just let the world pull his attention away. The lesson for us is not to lose focus, but if you do, call out to Jesus. If we do that, **We too can Trust in the Strong Arm of the Lord** to get us back on track.

Two things happen when they get into the boat. First, Jesus finishes the main task. He calmed the storm, and suddenly they were at the shore. Second, the disciples *worship* him. Note two things. First, when Jesus had calmed a similar storm in Matthew 8. The disciples responded wide-eyed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the sea obey him!" (8:27) This time, they worship the Lord. Something about these events, or maybe all the events of the day, caused them to worship Him. Second, note that these good, Jewish monotheists worshipped Him. Their faith was developing to the point that they knew Jesus was more than a powerful rabbi blessed by God. They were moving toward a full understanding of Jesus' divinity. The same should be true for us. As we experience the Lord's work in our lives, we will move further along in our understanding of Him.

CONCLUDE

In this lesson, we have seen the importance of solitude. It is necessary for us to disconnect from the world and focus on the Lord. We have seen that stress in life can cause us to display irrational fear. Instead of stressing about life, we should remember that the great I AM is present. We also saw that because of Christ's great power, we can ask for great things and participate in great things. Lastly, we saw that we should not get distracted by the world while attempting those great things. The disciples faced their fears through a bit of exposure therapy, and they came through it with a greater understanding of who Jesus. If we allow Him to expose us to more of His power through dependence on Him, we will experience something similar.

Guide and Challenge your group

- Do you need to disconnect from the world to focus on the Lord? Find time this week to do so.
- Do you need to ask the Lord for great things? Are you ready to join Him in those great things? Ask Him to show up and then make the effort to join Him.
- Lastly, do you need Jesus to refocus your attention and support you with His strong arm? Call out to Him. He is closer than you might imagine. He will support you.

Notes:

"Doubt equals little faith--not no faith, but less faith than you should have." (Preaching, 415)

"As doubt is contrary to faith (21:21), so fear is contrary to faith." (Preaching, 415)