

Walking on Water
Mark 6:45-56
ABC 4/16/23

Jesus Lizard Video (33 seconds)

As we continue our study through Mark's gospel, guess what event we're looking at today? Open to Mk 6 as he continues to unfold the answer to the question, *Who is this man Jesus?* (4:41; 6:14-16). As you recall, Jesus had sent out the disciples with His authority to preach, cast out demons, & heal people (6:7-13). They spend a number of weeks doing this & then return & report to Jesus what they've taught & done (30). Jesus has them all go by boat to a secluded place so they can get some much needed rest (31-32). The crowds see them leave & follow along the shoreline so that when Jesus & His disciples put to shore in a desolate area, the crowd is waiting for them. Jesus had compassion on them & taught them for quite some time (33-34). As it grew late, the disciples told Jesus to send the crowd away so they could find something to eat. But Jesus tells them to feed the crowd (37) which dumbfounded the disciples. How could they feed this crowd? They see what food is available & find 5 loaves & 2 fish. Jesus prays & multiplies that little lunch so that everyone **ate & was satisfied** (42) & there were 12 baskets of leftovers. That's were we left it a few weeks back. Today we pick it up in vs 45 & Mark links the miracle of walking on water to the feeding of the 5,000. They're linked both in a continuous narrative & theologically because the disciples are amazed at this 2nd miracle because **they had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves, but their heart was hardened** (52). Both miracles exhibit the failure of the disciples to recognize Jesus' divine authority. Both may also indicate a *greater than Moses* theme, where the disciples fail to recognize that Jesus is much more than a mere prophet. As the feeding miracle recalled the manna in the wilderness, so Jesus' walking on the water may be reminiscent of the Israelites' passing through the Red Sea¹ (Ps 77:19–20; 78:13–25; Is 43:16; 51:10). **45-56**

The miraculous *feeding of the 5,000* (plus women & children) is done. It's the evening of a long day that started out with Jesus & the disciples needing rest. But the day isn't done.

¹ Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, p 281

1. Jesus & the Father (45-46) **Immediately** following the miraculous feeding, what does Jesus do? He **made His disciples get into the boat** (45). **Made** means *to force, insist, or compel*. This wasn't a request. Undoubtedly, the disciples would've wanted to stay & enjoy the popularity of the moment, but Jesus gave them no choice. He commanded them to depart by boat & **go ahead of Him to the other side**. They were to cross the lake & He'd meet them on the other side. Mark doesn't say why He abruptly sends His disciples away while He remained behind to dismiss the crowd. But John gives us these details:

Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world." So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come & take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone (6:14-15).

The crowd was fueled with Messianic fervor. We know the disciples were caught up in Jesus being King, even fighting over who would sit on His right & left. To prevent them from being caught up in the passion of the people, Jesus compels them away in the boat. He wants to prevent any spontaneous moves to make Him King. God's plan wasn't that Jesus should ascend to some earthly throne there & then, but He should go by the way of suffering. There would be suffering before the glory, the cross before the crown. After getting the disciples loaded & launched, Jesus sent **the crowd away** (45). Dispersing a crowd of thousands, enamored by being fed for free, wouldn't have been an easy task, humanly speaking, but Jesus does it. There's no way of knowing for sure, but it's now probably around 9 p.m. The disciples & crowds have left. Does Jesus then set out for the other side of the lake? No. He heads up **the mountain to** spend time with His Father in prayer (46). Why now? Mark records Jesus praying 3x, each is in the dark & in solitude. The 1st was before the choosing of His disciples (1:35). The 3rd was in Gethsemane with the cross directly in front of Him (14:35). The reason for Jesus' prayer here in Mk 6 is less clear, but He's at a point of growing fame & is soon to meet more opposition from the Pharisees.² Perhaps these matters were on His mind. Whatever the case, Jesus lived in constant prayer, & in times of crises He took to prayer. No doubt part of His prayers were on behalf of His disciples. Knowing what they were about to experience, He entrusted them into the hands of His Father. Surely, as He did on other occasions (Lk 22:32; Jn

² R.C. Sproul, *Mark*, pp 146-147

17:6–26), Jesus asked the Father to give them true & growing faith. His prayer life shows His utter dependence on His Father as He moved steadily toward the cross.

2. Jesus & the Disciples (47-52) The sun was down & dusk had turned to darkness. **47-48a**

Due to a sudden & terrifying storm, what normally would have been a routine crossing had become treacherous. Violent winds (Jn 6:18) propelled crushing waves that battered the boat (Mt 14:24). That the disciples were **straining at the oars** indicates they were working frantically to survive. Elsewhere, the word translated as **straining** is rendered *torment*. The disciples were experiencing great pain & frustration in their rowing. A trip that normally would have lasted only an hour or 2 had become an all-night struggle. In chpt 4 (37-41) the disciples had experienced a similar storm, but Jesus had been with them. This time they were by themselves. Keep in mind, the disciples are in this position at the insistence of Jesus. It was in obedience to Him that made them so tormented now. Jesus remained on land & His disciples are struggling in a storm, **straining at the oars**. Though His disciples were by themselves & miles away, they were never outside the reach of His divine protection. Jesus saw them in the storm, in the dark, all alone, wet, miserable, & exhausted. Mark doesn't tell us how Jesus saw the dilemma of the disciples in the dark & at such a distance. Whether it was moonlight,³ predawn light,⁴ or through supernatural insight,⁵ He knew what they were going through. Jesus hadn't abandoned them. Mark indicates it was **about the 4th watch of the night** (48) when Jesus came to help (Mt 14:25). The Romans divided the night into 4 watches. The 4th was from 3 to 6 a.m. The disciples, who'd left around 9 the previous evening, were still on the lake in the hours just before dawn. In all of that time, 6-9 hours, they'd been able to row only a few miles as they battled the wind (Jn 6:18). The situation seemed desperate for the disciples, even hopeless, when Jesus sovereignly intervened. **He came to them, walking on the sea** (48). Out of the darkness, in the midst of the winds & waves, Jesus moved to the disciples **walking**, literally, *on top of the water*. The Creator of the waters & the wind set foot on the choppy surface as if it were hard as stone, making His way to them in their hour of despair. Stop there for a minute. Can any of you

³ C.E.B. Cranfield, *Mark*, p 225

⁴ R.T. France, *Mark*, p 271

⁵ David Garland, *Mark*, p 261

walk on water? Physicists say a human would have to run 65 mph to be able to do what the *Jesus Lizard* does. No one can do that. Jesus didn't have to run, He simply walked on top of the waves. This clearly carries divine significance, since God alone **tramples down the waves of the sea** (Job 9:8). In the exodus it's God **who makes a way through the sea & a path through the mighty waters** (Is 43:16; 51:10; Ps 77:19). Jesus is doing what only God can do & mankind can't do & can never conceive of doing. His wisdom is beyond compare, He moves mountains, shakes the earth, obscures the sun, arrays the heavens in splendor, & walks on the waves of the sea. This God can't be conceived of in human terms. He is wholly Other, & can never be confused with human beings.⁶ Jesus comes to His disciples in response to their struggle, even if it means walking on the water. But what's the next phrase? Strangely, it says, **& He intended to pass by them** (48). If He was coming to help, why would He pass them? Various theories have been given:

- 1) Some say **intended** could mean *was about to*. In this case it's the disciples' perspective, rather than Jesus' intention, that's being described. It *seemed as though* He was going to pass them by.⁷
- 2) Another theory is Jesus is passing in front of them *to make Himself visible to the disciples to relieve their fear & to reveal His power*.⁸ Of course in this view, His plans fail since they're terrorized instead of relieved.
- 3) Others interpret it as an idiom meaning to *spare from catastrophe* (cf Amos 7:8), so that Jesus is coming to help them.⁹
- 4) I believe this is an intentional echo of OT language. One of the basic principles of biblical interpretation is that Scripture interprets Scripture. To understand what this is about, we have to go back to the OT. When God manifested Himself in the OT, He often did so by means of a theophany, which simply means for God to manifest, show, or display Himself in some visible way. In Genesis, when God promised Abraham he'd inherit the land of Canaan, he asked, **O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?** (15:8). God appeared to him as a smoking oven & a burning torch as part of a covenant-making ceremony (17). That was a theophany. So was when God

⁶ James R. Edwards, *Mark*, p 266

⁷ Cranfield, *Mark*, p 226; France, *Mark*, p 272

⁸ L.W. Hurtado, *Mark*, p 103

⁹ H. Fleddermann, "And He Wanted to Pass by Them'," *CBQ* 45, pp 389–95

appeared to Moses as a burning bush (Ex 3). The 2 most famous theophanies are found in the books of Exodus & 1 Kings & both use language of *passing by*. In Ex 33 Moses asked God, **I pray You, show me Your glory!** (18). God replied:

“I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, & will proclaim the name of the LORD before you; & I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, & will show compassion on whom I will show compassion.” But He said, **“You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me & live!”** Then the LORD said, **“Behold, there is a place by Me, & you shall stand *there* on the rock; & it will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock & cover you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away & you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen”** (19–23).

3x here, God spoke of *passing by* Moses, of causing His goodness or glory to pass by. In this account, just as in Gen 15, when God showed Himself, His glory passed by. In 1 Kgs 19, Elijah fled from Queen Jezebel & hid in a cave at Mount Sinai. God appeared to him & asked, **What are you doing here, Elijah?** (9). Elijah replied, **I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars & killed Your prophets with the sword. & I alone am left; & they seek my life, to take it away** (10). God said to Elijah, **Go forth & stand on the mountain before the LORD** (11). Then we’re told, **& behold, the LORD was passing by!** Not in the wind, earthquake, or fire, but in the **sound of a gentle blowing** (11b–12). Elijah, like Moses, experienced a theophany as the glory of the Lord passed by. That’s what happened here with the disciples. The glory of God, bursting through His shroud of humanity, was made visible to the disciples. Jesus, God in human flesh, walked on water. He clearly cares for His disciples. He sees their distress & comes to them in the darkest part of the night. He shows patience when they fail to see what it all means but recoil in fear. The disciples see more than God’s back, as Moses did; they saw the face of God in the face of His Son. He is the Savior, who brings deliverance. In the middle of their distress, they looked up & saw God passing by. By walking on the water He’s doing something no mortal is able to do. As anybody would be, the disciples were shocked when **they saw Him walking on the sea** (49). No doubt, the busy day followed by hours of rowing & constant struggle added to their confusion, & since they couldn’t believe their eyes nor recognize who it was, **they panicked & supposed that it was a ghost** (49). The mysterious form couldn’t really be a man because humans can’t walk on water. The word **ghost**, from which our word *phantom*

comes, refers to an apparition or imaginary specter. 1st-century superstition thought spirits of the night brought disaster, & the disciples apparently assumed the worst. They weren't immediately aware they were seeing the glory of God. They were so startled by what they saw that they shrieked in horror. They're trapped on a boat with nowhere to go, screaming like girls, & no one is thinking clearly. As Mark explains, they **cried out; for they all saw Him & were terrified** (50). **Terrified** means *to throw into a panic* or *to strike with dread*. They'd already been afraid of the storm; seeing a figure walk toward them on the water rocketed their fear to even greater levels of terror. Why didn't they recognize Jesus? Probably simply because they weren't expecting to see Him. Though they'd seen His many miracles including the feeding of the 5,000, they hadn't come to know who Jesus truly is. Compassionately, Jesus didn't let the disciples' terror last. **Immediately He spoke with them & said to them, "Take courage; it is I, do not be afraid"** (50). **Take courage** means *be brave* or *be of good cheer*. In the midst of the chaos & confusion, they recognized Jesus' voice calling to them as He says, **it is I** (50). One of the key features of John's gospel is Jesus' repeated use of the phrase **I am**. He gave Himself various titles: **I am the bread of life** (6:48); **I am the light of the world** (8:12); **I am the good shepherd** (10:14), & so on. It's an expression that translates the ineffable name of God that God gave Moses, **I AM WHO I AM** (Ex 3:14). Here we see that Mark's gospel also has an **I am** statement. As Jesus approached the boat, walking on the sea, He said to them, **It is I**, or literally, **I AM**. If there was any doubt this was a theophany, Jesus' use of the sacred name of God to identify Himself makes it certain. Jesus not only demonstrated His deity by walking on water, He also claimed to be God with the words He spoke. Jesus' purpose is to assure the disciples that **it is** He, God in human flesh, & not a ghost.

The God who made you is here! The God who fed 5,000 is walking on water toward you! The one who calmed the storm is in the storm with you. The God you have worshiped all your life is now standing before you. It is I, you know my voice. I am your Lord & Master—I don't need to be proclaimed as King, I am King, I am God.

Jesus wants to show His disciples a glimpse of His deity in order to help them unravel the clues to His identity. They don't follow a great prophet but the very Son of God. He does what no human can do & will do what no human can do, redeem mankind from the bondage of Satan & sin. Why

did He do this? Why was it necessary to show His disciples a theophany at this place & time? We don't need to speculate because Mark explains. 51

Jesus got into the boat, & when He did, the wind suddenly stopped. Just as He had done earlier (4:35–41), Jesus calmed the sea. However, despite having seen the same miracle before, & others besides, the disciples were **astonished**, literally, *to be beside oneself*. The miracles they'd just experienced blew their minds. Astonishment & amazement are a common theme throughout Mark's gospel (1:22, 27; 2:12; 5:20, 42; 12:17). Yet there's a surprising twist. While amazement in this gospel has typically been a positive response to the power of God, here it's negative, indicating perplexity & unbelief. Then Mark writes, 52.

What had they not understood? Simply put, they should have understood that Jesus was the Messiah, God incarnate. Who else could feed thousands of people with a few loaves & some fish? But they didn't yet understand. If the disciples had understood the miracle of the loaves they would have recognized Jesus' identity as the sovereign Lord who walks upon the waves of the sea. The problem of understanding isn't intellectual but a matter of faith. The crowds grasped the significance of Jesus' feeding in the wilderness (which was good), but applied a false understanding of the messianic reign to Jesus (which was bad). But the disciples had witnessed Jesus heal countless people, drive out legions of demons, & forgive sins. They'd seen Jesus calm the storm on this same body of water & 3 of them had seen Jesus raise Jairus' daughter from the dead. They had gone out preaching the message of the kingdom & were able to report back to Jesus that people were healed & that demons fled in terror when they did so. & then when Jesus fed the 5,000 the messianic symbolism was so great, no one could have missed it. The crowds saw it, although they misread Jesus' messianic role, & wanted to make Him king. But the disciples still don't get it because their hearts were hard. & so when they got into trouble on the sea, instead of panicking & thinking they had seen a ghost, they should have expected Jesus to come to their aid & called out to Him. But they didn't. Mark even tells us why they didn't get it. Their hearts were hard. The disciples didn't get it when Jesus calmed the storm. They didn't get it when Jesus fed the 5k. They didn't get it when He walked on the water. They didn't get it when He called Himself the **I AM**. They

didn't get it when He stepped into the boat & the wind died. Their hearts were hardened. Hard hearts are a serious condition. It was a characteristic of Jesus' opponents (3:5; 10:5), & it signals the beginning of an increasingly negative portrayal of the disciples in Mark's gospel. Will they go the way of the outsiders who have eyes but cannot see¹⁰ or will they come around & see Jesus for who He truly is? Thankfully, Jesus wasn't finished with them yet. At this point, Matthew tells us that Peter now spoke up & said,

"Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." & He said, "Come!" & Peter got out of the boat, & walked on the water & came toward Jesus. But seeing the wind, he became frightened, & beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand & took hold of him, & said to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (14:28-31).

Peter's faltering faith was representative of all the disciples & shows why this miracle was necessary to strengthen their faith. Though Jesus' rebuke was directed at Peter, it applied to them all. That Jesus graciously reached out & rescued Peter is a wonderful picture of the way He graciously helps all of His own in spite of their weaknesses (Heb 13:6). Why didn't Mark include Peter walking on water in his account? Maybe because Peter was Mark's source & Peter was a humble man who wanted the focus to be on Jesus & not him. Whatever the explanation, the ultimate answer is that the Holy Spirit only inspired Matthew to include that part. & only John tells us, **Immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going (6:21)**. One moment, they were battling a raging storm in the middle of the lake; the next, the wind & waves were calm & the boat had arrived at shore. What an amazing 24 hours.

3. Jesus & the Crowds 53-55

Gennesaret was a fertile plain about 3 miles long by a mile wide on the west side of the lake & densely populated. **When** Jesus & the disciples got out of the boat, **immediately the people recognized Him**. Knowing who He was & what He was capable of doing they brought to Him all **who were sick (55)**. Jesus continued to show compassion to needy people. Mark gives a final summary of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. **56**

¹⁰ Strauss, p 287

Not surprisingly, Jesus' healings brought Him the most fame & crowds would gather whenever He was rumored to be nearby. Everywhere He went, Jesus compassionately healed the sick who were brought to Him. His healing power had no limits & His loving-kindness no boundaries. He personally & graciously cared for all who sought Him. Like the woman in Mk 5 (28–29), desperate people suffering from all kinds of diseases & disabilities were healed simply by touching the fringe of His cloak. His matchless power, from the creation of a massive meal to walking on water to the healing of countless infirmities, was accompanied by His divine compassion. Mark stresses both the continuing popularity & the immense power of Jesus. He's treated like a celebrity wherever he goes, with the masses clamoring to touch Him for healing. While the needs are great, Jesus' power is greater. Mark's emphasis is on Jesus' powerful presence & the enthusiasm & awe this generates among the people. Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Son of God, whose authoritative actions confirm His message of the kingdom of God.

What do we learn from this? The physical blessings of Jesus aren't an end to themselves but a fork in the road, one branch leads to Jesus' saving purpose, the other to a false understanding of Jesus as simply a miracle worker. As in most of Mark's gospel to this point, the primary emphasis is on who Jesus is. Jesus' divine authority is on center stage as He displays authority over nature (4:35–41; 6:30–44). Just as God treads on the mighty seas (Job 9:8) & made a way through the sea at the exodus (Ex 13), so Jesus walks on water toward the disciples. Similarly, just as Yahweh passed before Moses & Elijah to reveal His glory, so Jesus reveals His divine authority by passing in front of the disciples. When the disciples struggle in their boat against the wind, Jesus comes to their aid. He gives words of assurance & then calms the storm that's preventing their progress. Though divine care & rescue aren't the main point of this, it's an important secondary one. This passage, like the earlier calming of the sea (4:35–41), has been understood as Jesus' rescue through the storms of life. While we must be careful not to over-allegorize these passages, the challenges the disciples face are certainly similar to the spiritual & physical challenges we face. Just as the disciples rowed for hours but made little progress, so we often seem to be going nowhere in the storms of life. It's at times like these that Jesus reveals Himself to us with words of encouragement

through His Word. God doesn't always remove our obstacles, but calms our hearts, if not the wind, & gives us strength to push toward our goal. If we're obedient to Jesus, there will be plenty of storms. There will be danger & difficulty & weariness & exposure & anxiety & dread & sadness. We'll experience sorrows & stresses. But take cheer: Jesus sees all & knows all. He prays for us, even while we're in the storm. We have a great high priest who sits at the right hand of God who ever lives to intercede for us. Right now, He's bringing you by name before His Father's throne & He's interceding on your behalf. He comes to us in the midst of the gale, walking across the problems that afflict us. We learn more about Jesus as we venture out onto troubled waters. Jesus is slowly but surely revealing Himself for who He really is. He's doing so to those who otherwise will perish in their sins. Do you know this Jesus? He came to save us from the death sentence of sin. & He does so by the way of the cross.

In contrast to Jesus' authority over nature & His divine self-revelation stands the disciples' failure to respond. Stymied by the wind, they react in terror at Jesus' presence. From a human perspective, this is natural. Yet these are the disciples who've seen Jesus heal the sick, cast out demons, calm the storm, & raise the dead. They've just witnessed Jesus' miraculous feeding of thousands. By now their faith should be strong, yet they react with fear & disbelief. & yet, at the end of Matthew's version of the story, the disciples worship & cry out, **You are certainly God's Son!** (14:33). Mark has a different slant. The 2 accounts may be harmonized by assuming that Matthew is stressing the positive side of their amazement, while Mark emphasizes its insufficient & fleeting nature. Or maybe the disciples were at different levels of understanding. In Mark this is the beginning of a downward spiral that will bring the disciples to a dangerous turning point. In 8:14–21 (an event again involving a boat, bread, & hard hearts), Jesus warns the disciples against having eyes that can't see & ears that can't hear. Their faith is in the balance. The disciples' problem isn't that they're unable to make headway against the wind or they aren't rowing hard enough. It's that they haven't learned that God is at work through His Son Jesus to accomplish His saving purpose. He refused to be king because He was on His way to the cross. That is why He came & we remember & commemorate His death through taking communion together. PRAY MEN COME

Jesus came to deal with the underlying cause of all human sickness & suffering. What is it? Sin. We're a fallen race & our sin leaves us under the curse of death. But Jesus, the promised Messiah, the Son of God, the only Mediator between God & us, came to die in our place. Jesus didn't come the 1st time to be the world Ruler. He came to be the only Savior. He didn't come to be king, He came to go to the cross, to die for our sins, & rise from the dead in order for us to be forgiven & made right with God. He came so God's judgment for our sins would fall on Him, so that God's eternal judgment wouldn't have to fall on us. Jesus had a mission to fulfill, to suffer & die for our sins. The deepest moment of His suffering on our behalf wasn't physical; the deepest moment of His suffering was relational. It's that moment on the cross where the Father turned His back on His Son, & Jesus, in the deepest of grief, cried out, **My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?** (Mk 15:34). Jesus took our rejection so we won't be forsaken by God. PRAY/PASS

While they were eating, He took *some* bread, and after a blessing He broke *it*, and gave *it* to them, and said, "Take *it*; this is My body" (Mk 14:22).

The Bread of Life (Jn 6:35) willingly gave up His life, paying the wages of our sin, so that we might be made right with God. Let's eat of the bread remembering Him.

& when He had taken a cup *and* given thanks, He gave *it* to them, and they all drank from it. & He said to them, "This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I say to you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mk 14:23-25).