

Facing Times Of Stress: Controlled By Doubts

Avoiding Weak Faith

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We know that we are living in the last days; and that these days include periods of danger and stress; and they are the result of the activities of evil men, under Satan's influence. Even still we, as members of God's church, have a personal responsibility to control and overcome anxiety, fears, depression, and doubts. We are to be prepared so that we are not caught off guard.

The apostle John wrote in:

I John 5:4-5 For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

The source, or means, of spiritual victory is by faith in Jesus Christ. He overcame the world, and it is by that faith that makes us one with Him, and that imbues us with His Spirit, that we are able to achieve victory also. A mind troubled by doubt cannot focus on the path to victory, because doubt destroys faith. Doubt blocks faith, and stops the fruit of faith from being produced.

The apostle Peter was a man who meant well and acted on it, but sometimes he did the wrong thing, as we all do. When the detachment of troops and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees came to arrest Jesus, Peter lashed out with his sword, cutting off the ear of Malchus, the high priest's servant.

Earlier, as Jesus was conducting His last Passover service, before becoming the ultimate sacrifice, He told Peter that Satan was looking to spiritually

devour him. But, ultimately Jesus would give him a strong faith, so that Peter would not fail, and that he could strengthen the brethren after Jesus was crucified.

Peter in his zeal, said to Jesus, "Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death." This was a very noble and even genuine statement. Then Jesus prophesied of Peter's coming denial, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster shall not crow this day before you will deny three times that you know Me."

Earlier in Peter's discipleship under Christ, he showed the same zeal while Jesus was walking on the sea. He always meant well; he loved and admired Jesus, and he wanted to be like Him in every way. So, when Peter saw Jesus walking on the stormy sea, he wanted to do the same thing.

Matthew 14:22-33 Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away. And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there. But the boat was now in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary. Now in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid." And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." So He said, "Come." And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. Then those who were in the boat came and worshiped Him, saying, "Truly You are the Son of God."

Hopefully, you are like Peter, very sincere in your desire to be like Jesus Christ. You want to follow His example in all things, and maybe you are also one of those naturally enthusiastic people who throw themselves whole-

heartedly into everything. You always do your best—only to have things go wrong. I am sure some of you feel that way. It seems like even your best is not good enough at times.

Some people seem to be endowed with more natural "faith" than others. Or, is it merely enthusiasm? Peter was like that. He had the type of personality that would jump into a situation, where other more cautious people would hold back. And, sometimes it got him into trouble. Peter had zeal and a positive, can-do attitude about life. Jesus appreciated that. He did not want to squelch Peter's personality. Eventually, He would choose him to be the leader among the original twelve apostles. But, first, Jesus had to teach the enthusiastic, rather self-confident young Peter some important lessons.

God is not against the right kind of confidence. He rewards those who do the best that they can. But we have to remember that even our best efforts are not going to be enough to save us. Otherwise, we could be "saved by works," something that the Bible clearly shows is impossible. We need something far more than that. This is what Peter had to learn, as we do as well.

Two miracles of Jesus Christ tell of Him calming storms on the Sea of Galilee. The first miracle of this type appears in Matthew 8:23-27, and it is also mentioned in Mark 4:35-41 and Luke 8:22-25. In this miracle Jesus causes the storm to cease.

Matthew 8:23-27 Now when He got into a boat, His disciples followed Him. And suddenly a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves. But He was asleep. Then His disciples came to Him and awoke Him, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" But He said to them, "Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?" Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. So the men marveled, saying, "Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?"

The second miracle of this type, that we read earlier in Matthew 14, has many features in common with the first miracle found in Matthew 8, where 'the boat was covered with the waves.' The first and main point being that, like the Matthew 8 miracle, the Matthew 14 miracle, where Peter steps out of the boat to walk to Christ, concentrates attention on the nature and the

character of faith and the importance of having a right view of it. But it expresses this in a slightly different way.

In Matthew 8:23-27, the major trouble is the failure to realize that faith is connected with activity; it is something that we must apply. 'Where is your faith?' The disciples were doing nothing. The disciples had faith, but they were not focusing it on their individual problem. In a general way, we are considering the subject of the true character—or quality—of faith.

But before we move toward the main issue, important as it is, we need to notice one preliminary issue, which is absolutely essential. In both the incidents in Matthew 8, of the storm at sea and 'the boat being covered with the waves', and in Matthew 14 of the storm at sea 'when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus,' the first thing that we notice is Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

In both miracles, Jesus stands out in the power of His divine nature. We see Him calming the waves, even though they were stormy and turbulent, and in Matthew 14:24-28, we also see Him enabling His servant, Peter, to walk on the sea with Him. We see Him commanding and controlling the elements. We have to start with the power of His divine nature, and Him commanding and controlling the elements, because we cannot begin to consider the issue of faith, nor can we have a true understanding of faith, if we are not clear about the power and glory of God manifested through Jesus Christ here.

We are not talking about just any kind of faith; we are talking about what is called "saving faith." The essential preliminary to any consideration of that is the sovereignty and power of God the Father and Jesus Christ. If we doubt Their sovereignty then we are going to have trouble even having little faith.

There is no true Christian faith apart from that which starts by saying that Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God, that He is our Lord and Savior. And here in this incident we see Him standing out in the power of His glory; He is the Lord of the elements, as He demonstrates here. We start with that, because He is absolutely necessary and central to our salvation. It is also absolutely vital in any consideration of faith to demonstrate that it is a failure in some shape or form to realize what God the Father is, and what Jesus Christ is, that accounts for all our troubles and all of our doubts.

Still, it is clear that the goal of recording this incident is to call attention to this thing that happened to Peter. We see Christ everywhere in the gospels in His holiness, but each separate incident brings something unique, something special of its own; and obviously the special thing here is the incident as it affects the apostle Peter personally. Peter starts out so well; then he gets into trouble and ends so badly. So that is the picture that we have of the young Peter. At first he seems full of faith, and then he ends up a miserable failure, crying out in desperation as it all happened so quickly!

One of the primary characteristics of the Sea of Galilee is that storms come down on it suddenly. It may be calm one moment, and the next there is a raging storm. That is what happened to the sea in Matthew 8—that sudden change in the whole situation; then Christ calmed the sea. It was different in Matthew 14, because the sea was already raging when Peter stepped off the boat.

A similar thing happens to us at times. An opportunity comes along; we step out on faith and then begin to doubt; then the situation goes from opportunity to crisis. When we doubt, raging problems come upon us quickly.

Doubting is vacillating between trusting God and trusting the world, or one's own natural abilities.

It is important to notice that the difference between the miracle of causing the storm to cease in Matthew 8, and the miracle of Jesus and Peter walking on water in Matthew 14, is that in Matthew 8, the storm came in as a fresh factor to upset the disciples—there Jesus fell asleep, and then the storm came. But, in Matthew 14, as it concerns Peter, that is not the case. There is nothing new, there is nothing fresh introduced when Peter steps out of the boat.

The storm in Matthew 14 had already started and was raging before Christ came anywhere near the disciples, or near the boat. The boat, we are told, was in the midst of the sea, tossed with the waves, and Christ was praying, alone on the mountainside. That is an important feature; here the disciples

are in the boat without Christ and the storm is raging, then He suddenly appears, and this incident takes place. The thing to remember is that Peter had no new factor to contend with after he stepped out of the boat.

It was not that he stepped out onto smooth water and then the storm came; the storm was already there, before Christ appeared anywhere near the boat. The point is that there is no new factor, as there was on the other occasion in Matthew 8, and yet Peter got into trouble, and became unhappy and frightened and desperate. Doubt deteriorated into more doubt.

The question is, why? And the answer is that the trouble was entirely in Peter. Christ gives us an essential diagnosis—it was little faith. "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" It is little faith leading to the entry of doubt.

Here, then, it seems there are a number of important lessons that we can learn, and if we just learn them, and understand them, they will save us from many an attack of anxiety and stress.

First and foremost, we notice Peter's mentality, Peter's temperament. We know that when we are converted and become Christian, our temperaments do not change; they remain what they were. We do not become someone else (in the sense of our temperaments). We are still ourselves, and we still have the same weaknesses to overcome, and the same strengths to build upon.

But in this sense, we can say what Paul said:

Galatians 2:20-21 I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God. . .

Yet, that 'I' in that passage is always the same. We are always ourselves, and though we become Christian, we are still ourselves. We have our own individual temperament, our own individual characteristics, and the result is that we all have our individual problems.

There are certain problems that are fundamental and common to us all, but they come to us in different ways, in several ways. We are all familiar with

this fact. All members of the church are not the same, all members of any group, however small, are not the same; we all have certain things about which we have to be especially and exceptionally careful. Others may not be troubled by the same things that we are.

But they have other things about which they have to be careful. The hot-tempered person has to watch his temper very closely, and equally the lethargic person has to be careful, because he is so flabby in his whole mentality that he tends not to stand when he should stand; he tends not to work when he should work.

In other words, we all have our peculiar difficulties and they generally arise from our own peculiar temperament, which God has given us. We can go as far as to say in this context that probably the thing that we have to watch most of all is our own strength, our strong point. We all tend to fail ultimately because of our strongest, most dominant point. If we are a workaholic, it is going to affect our family and our spiritual life.

So this same thing appears to be true of Peter. Peter's great characteristic was his energy, his capacity for quick decision, and his active personality. He was enthusiastic and impulsive, and that was the thing that was constantly leading him into trouble. It is a beneficial thing to have an energetic nature. By the world's standard, some of the greatest men the world has ever known can be explained mainly by their energy, not by their intellectual capacity, not by their wisdom, but by their sheer energy. Look at the conquerors of the world, the Napoleons and the Alexandras the Greats; they were driven with immense energy.

Energy is a great gift, and the thing that generally comes with it is a capacity for decision. But this was the thing that was constantly bringing Peter into trouble in his early life.

An excessive, misguided amount of energy often leads to an unsteady Christian life, a Christian life that lacks balance. What a perfect illustration we have of it here with young Peter.

Look at Peter as he recognizes Jesus at the beginning of this incident. There he is, in the boat, in the midst of the storm. He has sufficient faith to say to

Christ: "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." And out he steps! What magnificent belief that was!

But look at him, just a few moments later, and there he is crying out in fear. That was always characteristic of Peter. When Christ was talking about His death and how He was going to be forsaken, the energetic Peter jumps right in with his well-intended, but false promise.

Matthew 26:33-34 Peter answered and said to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble." Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times."

This is in no way meant to put Peter down. Peter was a great man of faith as he went through his life.

And in no time he is denying with oaths and curses that he never knew Jesus! Peter's mentality was unsteady, he was the kind of person who is either on top of the mountain or down in the deepest depths, either full of enthusiasm and excitement and making us all feel that we are doing nothing at all, or utterly despondent and depressed. What is the cause of this fluctuation between ecstasy and agony—between uplifted success and miserable failure?

The answer is that it is due to temperament, human reasoning, and having little or no faith. The trouble with this kind of person is that he tends to act without thinking; his faith has not been based on sufficient thought or a right perspective.

The problem with young Peter was that he did not think things through; he did not work them out beforehand. He did not consider the end! He did not consider the consequences of his actions. He tried to do things from his own human faith, which in the end did not sustain him.

Belief alone is not enough. Remember that James wrote in James 2:19: "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!" Just human belief is not enough.

One good thing about Peter is that he had works. His energy manifested itself in instant action. In the gospel accounts, Peter is always the first one to volunteer. Take for example the incident in John 21. The disciples had been out fishing all night and had caught nothing, and then Christ appeared on the seashore. At John's words "It is the Lord," Peter threw on his fisher's coat and jumped into the sea to go to Christ.

Compare this with what the other disciples did:

John 21:8 But the other disciples came in the little boat (for they were not far from land, but about two hundred cubits), dragging the net with fish.

It seems Peter was always the first in everything, and that was his trouble at times. There is a perfect illustration of this even after Pentecost. In Galatians 2, he was still the same impulsive man, and Paul had to rebuke him over the fact that he did not work out the question of justification by faith, as he should have done.

Notice that Peter was so focused on doing—on action, on works—that he missed the application of being justified by faith in Jesus Christ.

Galatians 2:11-16 Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews? We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.

In this case here, Peter was requiring the Gentiles to be circumcised (a physical action); so Peter was still focused on action, on doing, just as he was when Christ was walking on the sea and Peter stepped off the boat to walk to Him. Peter was prone to jump to action first, rather than thinking things through at certain times. But he had a wonderful attitude, and he repented of these things, and was definitely a great hero of faith.

In this incident, mentioned in Galatians 2, Peter had no excuse, because he was the first man to admit the Gentiles into the church. You remember the Cornelius incident. As you read the account in Acts 10, you see Peter rising to an impressively correct decision, in allowing the Gentiles to join with the Jews in God's church.

It was a tremendous thing for a Jew to bring a Gentile into the church. But Peter went back on that at Antioch and when those messengers came down from James, he hid his true feelings, and Paul had to stand his ground on the issue because Peter was wrong; he was hypocritical. We are all human, and we all make mistakes, and Peter the apostle did as well.

I mean no disrespect to Peter, he was a hero of faith and an apostle of God, but there were times when Peter missed the mark, as we all do at times. What was the matter with Peter? It was the old trouble; he accepted a position without working out all its implications. He did not consider the ends of his actions sometimes. That is invariably the trouble with the energetic type—this energy, this capacity for decision, this impulsiveness tends to make them do things intuitively, instead of thinking them right through and understanding them. The result is that there are these violent fluctuations in their spiritual life.

This is a very common cause of spiritual depression, because these types of people are always highs and lows. Their energy is taking them to the peak and high, and when their energy runs out then they are brought dropped to a severe low. This is why we are dealing with anxiety and facing times of stress in this sermon.

Now let us turn our focus back to Matthew 14:

Matthew 14:29-31 So He said, "Come." And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"

That brings us to the second point, which is that the teaching of this incident concerns doubts, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" This teaches us that we ourselves sometimes produce our own doubts. That was the trouble with young Peter, at this point. He produced his own doubts, by looking at the waves. He led himself into difficulties that need not have risen. It was not as though Christ had said to Peter: "Peter, be careful! Do you realize what you're doing?" There was not a word about that from anyone. Peter, by looking at the waves himself, produced the doubts.

Let us be very careful here. We often lead ourselves into anxiety and depression; we lead ourselves into doubts by dabbling with certain things that should be avoided; and we stress ourselves out.

For example: the folly of venturing into certain arguments that will take us beyond our depth. Instead of refusing to do so because he does not know enough, a person plunges in, and his faith is shaken because he allowed someone else to cause him to produce doubts. This happens constantly concerning biblical doctrines. People heap up teachers for themselves and become confused, and this causes a great deal of needless doubts, and often takes them out of God's church. In other words, we should stand on the truth as we know it and not attempt to deal with scientific, philosophical, or theological questions with which we are not competent to deal. Sometimes we lead ourselves into doubts this way.

Another thing that I want to emphasize is that some doubts are not always incompatible with faith. Though you have faith, you may still be troubled by doubts, and there are examples of this not only in Scripture, but also in the subsequent history of the church. The right kinds of doubts often cause us to seek truth. They may encourage us to *prove* what is true.

Romans 12:2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

I Thessalonians 5:21 Test [KJV prove] all things; hold fast what is good.

The motivation for proving something to be true often begins with doubting what society has told us. When we doubt the value of something we will test its quality. Coin dealers do this with gold and silver.

If anyone has not been troubled by doubts in his or her Christian life, it is time to examine your foundations again, and make certain that you are not enjoying a false peace, or artificial rest, or dreamy bliss, in what we could call presumptuous human belief. That is what is usually seen in mainstream Christianity; presumptuous human belief.

The next principle is: if doubts *control* us, it is an indication of a weak faith. That is what happened to Peter. His faith had not gone, but because it was weak, doubt mastered him and overwhelmed him and he was shaken.

If you had asked Peter certain questions at the exact moment when he was in that state of terror and alarm, he would have given common excuses every time. But if you had asked him about the sovereignty of the Lord, I am sure he would have given you the right faithful answer, but for the time being certain doubts had mastered him.

His faith was still there, but according to the teaching of Christ here, whenever our doubts do master us, it is indicative of the fact that ours is a weak faith. We should never allow this to happen. Doubts will attack us, but that does not mean that we are to allow them to control us.

So, how do we avoid it? In simplest terms the antidote is—great faith. It is 'little faith' that allows people to be mastered by doubts, the antidote must, therefore, be a 'great faith.' That is the thing that is emphasized in Matthew 14, above everything else.

What are the characteristics of this *great* faith? The first is this: it is knowledge of God's sovereignty, glory, and love, and of Jesus Christ and His authority and power, with a steady trust and confidence in that.

Now Peter, as we have already seen, starts off well, and that is of the essence of true faith. Here was a man with the other disciples in the boat and with the storm raging around them. The sea and the wind were contrary and the boat was being tossed by the waves, and the situation was becoming quite desperate, and that would test the faith of anybody. But suddenly Christ appeared, and when they saw Him they said: 'Is that a man walking on the water? That is impossible, it must be some kind of spirit.' They cried out for fear, and immediately Jesus spoke and said, "It is I; do not be afraid."

And then we have this display of the essence of true faith by Peter. Peter answered Him, and said: "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." Now that is an indication of true faith, and you see what it means, it means that Peter was saying in effect to Christ: 'If You really are the Lord, in that case, I know there is nothing impossible for You. Give proof of it by commanding me to step out of this boat in this raging sea and enabling me to walk on it.' But that is where it ended, once he stepped out and had walked a few steps.

He believed in Jesus Christ, in His power and ability. He did not believe in it merely theoretically. He tried it! He put his life on the line. We are told here, 'And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus.' Now that is the essence of faith, 'Lord, if it is You . . . then I know You can do this: command me to do it.' And he did it. Here again is the great principle: Faith begins and ends with a true knowledge of God the Father and Jesus Christ.

It begins with God the Father and Jesus Christ—not a feeling, not an act of will, but a confidence in our Savior Jesus Christ, knowing that God is behind Him and is the ultimate sovereign power. There is no value in any feeling unless it is based on this. Faith means believing the truth about our God and Father, and our Savior Jesus Christ, and knowing Them intimately.

I Peter 1:3-9 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again

to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.

That is why it is so important that we develop this faith of ours that may be weak, and if not weak it still needs much improvement and perfection.

When people are in a state of anxiety, they are stressed because they do not know these things as they should, and believe. If a person believes himself to be a miserable sinner that is unforgivable, he does not understand what Christ meant by what He said in Matthew 9:

Matthew 9:13 But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

Where there is a failure to learn and believe these things, faith is weak; so strong faith means to know them. To truly know them means to have confidence in God the Father and Jesus Christ.

I John 3:19-21 And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God.

There are many who go through life miserable and unhappy, because they do not truly understand these things. If only they did understand, then they could find that their self-condemnation in itself, if genuine, is an earnest of their repentance and a step toward their ultimate release.

In other words, the great antidote to anxiety and spiritual depression is the knowledge of true biblical doctrine. Not having the feelings worked up in meetings, but knowing the principles of God's way of life—knowing, understanding, and internalizing the truth.

The antidote to anxiety and depression is to have a right knowledge and understanding and reverence of God. And that is exactly what we get in His inspired written Word as God's Spirit reveals truth and love to us. We have to take the time to learn it. It is difficult work, but we have to study it, and meditate on it, and internalize it. Just a cursory look or scanning of the Bible is not enough. Just doing it once a week is not enough.

You remember what Jesus Christ said to certain Jews who had suddenly believed on Him.

John 8:31-32 Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

Free from doubts or fears, free from anxiety and depression, free from things that get you down. It is the truth that frees—the truth about Jesus Christ's life and teachings, and the truth about the sovereign God of all things.

Matthew 14:28-31 And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." So He said, "Come." And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Peter rightly started with the first thing, but forgot the second thing. The second thing is do not forget to refuse afterthoughts. Humanly it seems that it is a good thing to think again—but not with faith. It is foolishness. Controlling doubts are very foolish, and it is good for us to see how foolish and ridiculous they are.

So the next time you are tempted, remember this young man Peter, who should never have looked at the waves at all. He should never have looked at the chaos and trouble at his feet and in his path. Why not? Because he had already settled that question before he went out of the boat! Now you see why, earlier on, I emphasized the important detail that the storm was raging before Christ ever came near the boat. It would have been entirely different if Peter had stepped out on to a calm sea and then the storm had come; then there would have been at least some excuse for Peter.

When he said to Christ: "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water," Peter had already dealt with the question of the waves. He had been struggling with them in the boat for some time already. He knew that the boat was tossing, and so, when he made that statement to Christ, it means that he said to Him: 'I don't care what the sea is doing.' He was above it, he had solved the problem, and so he had gone out of the boat and was walking on the sea. There was nothing new about the waves, there was no new factor introduced. He was not confronted by any sort of new problem.

Jesus Christ was actually enabling Peter to walk on turbulent waves. Well, why then did Peter look at them? What reason did he have? None at all! From God's perspective it was foolish for him to do that!

That is always the trouble with weak faith, it comes back again to question what it has already been solved and answered. If you believe Jesus Christ, you must have met with and dealt with the difficulties, or you would not have arrived at faith.

Once you reach that point, why go back? That is foolish! Not only is it a matter of unbelief, it is a question of conduct and behavior. Why face troubles again that you have already met and solved before you step out of the boat?

Having believed Christ we have to shut the door to certain things and refuse to look at them. If you have dealt with them already, do not go back over them. How often is our trouble due to the fact that we go back? Peter should never have looked at those waves. There was nothing new for him to consider. It is of the essence of faith to refuse afterthoughts.

We must not let our faith be destroyed by afterthoughts. Reject them, have nothing to do with them. You have already dealt with them. Second-guessing destroys faith.

That brings me to the next principle. The next characteristic of faith is that it persists steadily in looking to God the Father and His Son.

What God has begun to do He can continue to do. The beginning of the work of calling us was a miracle, so if He can initiate a miraculous work He can keep it going; and what He has already begun He can continue, and He certainly has the desire to do so.

The apostle Paul encourages us with this:

Philippians 1:6 Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.

As long as we are clear about God's plan of salvation for each and every one of us, we should have no doubt. Of course, we are human and that is easier said than done, and that is why we are working our way through this. Without Christ we are utterly hopeless. It does not matter how long we have been in God's church, we are dependent on Him for every step. Without Him, we can do nothing. And really it is without God we can do nothing, because God the Father works things through Jesus Christ.

We can conquer our doubts by submitting to Him and by obeying Him. The way to answer doubts is to look at God and Christ, not down at the raging waves of trials that come our way.

We cannot live on an initial faith—that is what Peter seems to have been trying to do. He started off with great human faith, and then instead of going on with faith, he tried to live on it by itself.

Let me illustrate this. The children of Israel had to collect the manna each day, except on the Sabbath. That is the way God does things. He does not give us enough for a long period of time, but just enough to satisfy the need so we can learn the lessons involved before we receive any more.

He gives us an opportunity to learn to use what He gives before giving more. God works the same way when giving us other spiritual gifts. If we do not make good use of them, He does not give us more power to do them. We need a fresh supply every day of that spiritual power.

Peter's serious error was that he looked away from Christ. It is the 'fight of faith,' we are walking on turbulent waves, and the only way to keep walking forward is to keep looking at Him as our Savior. And, of course, I remind us all that it is ultimately that we are looking at God the Father. Jesus Christ perfectly mirrors God the Father.

Peter had faith to step over the side of the boat. But when he began to fully appreciate the consequences of what he had done by "stepping out on faith," his own human faith broke down. Jesus showed Peter that he really only had "little faith" because he had doubted. Energetic Peter needed something in addition to his own faith, a different kind of faith, a faith that would not break down in the face of adversity. This is not a faith that he could work up himself.

Some people make the excuse that they just cannot seem to work up enough faith. What they mean is, they do not believe God's inspired written Word. God says, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

When Jesus ministered as the Son of Man, He said, "I can of Myself do nothing" and "The Father that dwells in Me, He does the works." Jesus had, by the Spirit of God, the gift of healing, as mentioned in I Corinthians 12:9. Peter had it. Paul had it. Only a few had it.

God wants us to believe Him, to believe what He says, to believe He is willing and able. He wants us to believe that it is His will to do what He promises—and believe He will do it!

A serious question we should ask ourselves is: Do I have to "work up faith" to believe God is able and that He will keep His promises? If we feel that we have to work up faith then we are on the wrong wavelength. Paul tells us that true Christians "walk by faith, not by sight." What we see or feel has nothing to do with it. Jesus said, "According to your faith let it be to you."

Jesus knew that humanly speaking, He could not do what He had to do in His life without having more than simple human faith. He had to live without sinning even once, something even the most enthusiastic, energetic, and zealous human had never done, and never could with his own resources.

Jesus prayed earnestly to His God and Father for the faith that He needed to live a life that would qualify Him to be Savior.

Hebrews 5:7-8 Who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.

We see there that He had to offer up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears. That is an example to us. Jesus knew that without the faith that could come only from God, He could no more live a life free of sin than He could walk on water. He was flesh and blood, and His weight and the force of gravity made that impossible too.

But Jesus did walk on the water. Jesus had the kind of faith that could overcome impossible odds, the kind of faith that could move mountains if need be.

Matthew 17:20 So Jesus said to them [His disciples], "Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.

Of course, we have to ask in a way that is according to His will. To know His will we must faithfully seek and obey Him. So when Jesus walked across the Sea of Galilee, it was not just a stunt to impress His friends.

And by letting Peter fail, He was not treating him lightly. He wanted to teach him a lesson because he had so much more going for him. The other disciples learned about His power over the elements, and His compassion and love for them.

The words that Jesus spoke to Peter as he walked him back to safety probably remained ringing in Peter's ears for the rest of his life: "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" Peter doubted because he lacked the kind of faith that he needed to keep going. His human reasoning told him that he was in an impossible position, and that even abundant human faith could not sustain him.

As we enter into these next coming years, our faith is going to be sorely tried, and we are going to need more than our own faith to get through them—we are going to need the faith of Jesus Christ.

Over the years, and after many more well-intentioned mistakes, Peter grew to understand this even more. As leading apostle, he often found himself in seemingly impossible positions where his human faith and patience would have been stretched beyond the breaking point.

Peter was often in trouble with the authorities. He was thrown in jail. He had to spend years countering the influence of false teachers, and eventually he suffered martyrdom. But he was a man of great faith when God allowed his life to be taken. He had learned where to go to get the strength that he needed. We can see from his two epistles that he had become the epitome of faith and patience.

Those early years of the church must have tried even Peter's energy and enthusiasm to the extreme. God used Peter's strong personality and leadership to encourage the church through some anxious and stressful times, times that threatened to drown the faith of others. This man who nearly drowned in the Sea of Galilee had learned, though, that his best was not good enough. He had learned to go to God, to seek that kind of faith that only God can give.

The apostle Paul put what Peter had learned succinctly in writing to the Ephesian brethren:

Ephesians 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.

God often tries our patience, but He never fails us if we obey and believe Him unwaveringly. If the answer seems delayed in coming, remember James said, "the trying of your faith works patience." And the development of patience is one of the purposes of our existence. So if God puts us to the test, and tries our faith, rejoice and praise Him for using this experience to create in us more enduring faith and greater patience, which are two high points of holy character.

If God has promised, that is all we need. If God delays, He has a reason. So trust Him, and keep on trusting Him.

There is great consolation in this one incident of Jesus and Peter walking on the sea, and it is that Christ will never let us go under. What did Peter cry out in anxiety and terror?

Matthew 14:30-31 But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" [And then what?] And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. Then those who were in the boat came and worshiped Him, saying, "Truly You are the Son of God."

Thank God for this consolation; He will never let us go under, because we belong to Him. There may be times when we fail Him; we may feel we are at the point of despair, but no one can pluck us out of God's hands. We are all very familiar with the apostle Paul's assurances in:

Romans 8:38-39 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things

to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In a sense, that great lesson of the Matthew 14 incident is that Christ can keep us from falling. We will never need to cry out like that if we only keep our eyes on Him. Believing in Him, we will never fall, but keep straight on. If Peter had kept his eyes on Jesus, he would have gone on walking on the sea; he would never have become anxious. Christ could not only walk on the sea Himself, but He could have enabled Peter to walk on the sea. Nothing is impossible for Him.

Raging seas symbolically, in Scripture, represent chaos, trouble, danger, and uncertainty. So if Christ can walk on the sea, and He could enable Peter to walk on the sea, He can certainly enable us to walk on our trials, on our confusion, on our chaos in life. Nothing is impossible for Christ.

Matthew 19:23-26 Then Jesus said to His disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." When His disciples heard it, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

The ancient Israelites believed that riches were an evidence of God's blessing. They based this on the promises God gave the Israelites, through Moses, early in their history. It is true that God promised material blessing if they obeyed and material loss if they disobeyed. But to the unconverted ancient Israelites, the only way that God could teach them was through rewards and punishments. Good parents teach their young children in the same way.

However, the highest kind of obedience is not based on a desire for reward or the fear of punishment. It is motivated by love. In His life and His

teaching, Jesus tried to show the people that the inner spiritual blessings are far more important than the material gains. Those inner spiritual blessings include faith.

God sees the heart, and He wants to build character. Salvation is the gift of God in response to faith in Jesus Christ. Material riches are not a guarantee that God is pleased with us.

Faith, mighty faith, looks to God's promises. It laughs at impossibilities and raging waves.

James 1:2-8 My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

In facing these times of stress we have to deal with, resist, and overcome our human proclivity to doubt and let God increase the fruit of faith in us. We do this by maintaining and strengthening our relationship with our God and Father and our Savior Jesus Christ.