

Focus text

"Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God.'" **(Matthew 14:22-33, ESV)**

1. Keep the Sabbath

"Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone," **(Matthew 14:22-23, ESV)**

Jesus continues on His journey to rest. Remember, He's come to Bethsaida to grieve and pray after hearing of John's execution. But He paused in compassion for the crowds. Once wholeness had been restored, Jesus didn't give up on His time of grief, prayer, and rest; He resumed what was interrupted.

So many Christians keep saying, I don't have a full day to take time away with the Lord. I don't have time in my busy schedule to keep the Sabbath. Are we being too legalistic with rest? So what if there are some interruptions in your week? God commanded us to take time away for the Sabbath, so do the thing that interrupts and then go rest. Jesus models for us both holy interruptions and the focus of prayer and rest.

2. Afraid of the Dark

"but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear."

(Matthew 14:24–26, ESV)

The disciples in the boat awaiting Jesus had been caught in a pop-up storm on the Galilee. During the fourth watch, 3-6 am, Jesus decides to return to the students on a direct route only He can take. Normally, the fishermen on the boat would be sleeping, but in the wake of this storm, everyone had been stirred awake and was battling to keep the boat from capsizing. They see Jesus walking ON the lake, not around it, and begin to panic. They cry out that it's a phantom or ghost! They would have believed Jesus to be a spirit from the place of the dead, Sheol, coming to walk in the physical plane. They were caught up in believing that they were encouraging a dangerous spirit, all while trying not to sink in the wake of the wind and waves. Fear can be a powerful emotion, driving us to believe that God has left us alone. To be fair to the disciples, no one else who's ever lived could pull off this unique mode of transport. They aren't insane, thinking Jesus is a specter in the water and that they may be in harm's way.

"When the disciples in [Matthew 14](#) feared they were seeing a ghost, they were drawing on a widespread first-century Jewish belief in the supernatural realm. The ancient world—both in biblical tradition and surrounding cultures—held that disembodied spirits of the dead, called repha'im in Hebrew, existed as shades[1], often thought to inhabit Sheol[1].

However, this belief existed in tension with Jewish religious practice. While Israelites acknowledged these spirits existed, they were forbidden from consulting them, as [Deuteronomy 18:10–11](#) explicitly prohibited seeking communication with ghosts or the dead[1]. This prohibition didn't eliminate popular belief in apparitions—it simply made such contact religiously illicit.

The Greek word Matthew uses—*phantasma*—suggests some form of specter or apparition from the realm of the dead[2]. When the disciples encountered Jesus walking on water in the darkness, their immediate assumption that he was a ghost reflected their cultural expectation that the dead could manifest as visible forms. This wasn't irrational superstition but rather a framework rooted in their religious worldview.

Notably, when Jesus’s disciples believed they saw him as a ghost both during the water-walking incident and after his resurrection^[1], their fear made sense within their context. The appearance of an unexpected figure in darkness or the sudden presence of the risen Jesus would naturally trigger this interpretive category. Jesus’s response—that a ghost lacks flesh and bones—directly addresses their framework by clarifying that his resurrection body was fundamentally different from the disembodied shades they understood as ghosts^[1].¹

3. Do Not Be Afraid

“But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus.” (Matthew 14:27–29, ESV)

Jesus words ring out from the storm, to take heart, aka be courageous, because it’s not a ghost but it is Him! Now, this does little to make the story less confusing at this point, but the disciples are learning that while they aren’t out of the woods with the storm, they aren’t dealing with a ghost, just their master, who happens to heal, make bread, calm waves, and now, walk on them, apparently. There is no Old Testament story to look at, no historical context. Just the reality that Jesus is master over all of creation and can do whatever He wants!

Peter decides to try something and thus offers to meet Jesus on the lake. After all, a good student isn’t supposed to go far from their Rabbi! Jesus accepts the offer, and Peter begins to defy the laws of nature by walking on water. Peter is showing us the kind of powerful first steps one must take to follow Jesus. He is quick to move! Sometimes you just gotta trust Jesus and get out of the boat, ya’ll.

¹ [1] Mark Allan Powell, ed., [“Ghost,”](#) in *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary (Revised and Updated)* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), [327–328](#).

[2] R. K. Harrison, [“Ghost,”](#) in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised*, ed. Geoffrey W Bromiley (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979–1988), [2:460](#).

4. Don't Fear/Worship

"But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God.'" **(Matthew 14:30-33, ESV)**

Peter then shows us why quick steps may be premature. He loses focus on Jesus and then begins to sink into the lake. He then begins to cry to Jesus for salvation as the storm begins to swallow him up. Peter's first step is bold, but his second isn't, and the storm begins to swallow him.

However, Jesus reaches out and grabs him, saving him from the waves. This proves to us that Jesus isn't a ghost. When he grabs Peter, it's clear that Jesus has a real-life body. Jesus then rebukes Peter, asking why the doubt started after Peter got out of the boat. Don't just rush God with a rushed first step and then forget him with a panicked second step. Count the cost and be all in! However, even in doubt, Jesus steps in to save his faltering student.

Finally, after they climb into the boat, we see the wind stop. Not sure if this is Jesus' divine power or the pop-up storm has blown past, but the time of trial has come to an end. Just as before, when Jesus calmed the wind and waves, the disciples worshipped him as the Son of God. It's becoming clear to them that Jesus isn't just a spiritual teacher but truly the Son of God, a reference again to His messiahship.

Application

This week, no matter where you find yourself, will you panic or worship? Before you either stall completely or rush out without thinking, would you pray every morning this week that the Lord would give you guidance and strength to trust Him with your week?

Then, when He calls you to trust Him, walk with confidence the whole way!
Amen!