

FAITH

GROWING IN YOUR FAITH

Matthew 14:22-33

Jesus chastises Peter for his little faith. He says, “Why did you doubt?” After I pray, we are going to be looking deeper into verses 22-32, but the context of this is the historic -- the magnificent, the famous scene where Peter walks on water to Jesus. It’s an incredible scene, never to be forgotten. Throughout the ages of Church history and into eternity, we are going to remember this incredible scene where Jesus invites Peter to walk on water -- *and he does it*, by faith. But he also sinks. We are going to look at it and discover ways to grow in our faith.

For context, Jesus has just learned that John the Baptist has been put to death. He feeds 5000 men and their women and children, then he sends his disciples off onto a boat. But he stays back, then meets them later on. So here’s what we are going to do. We are just going to read verses 30 and 31, then I’m going to say a prayer. Then we’ll go in and mine this text for how we can grow in our faith -- six ways to grow in your faith. Look at verse 30. This is Peter, out walking on the water: “But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, ‘Lord, save me.’” Verse 31: “Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’”

Let’s pray. Jesus, we thank you for your word. And Father, we come to you this morning, acknowledging that each one of us here, many times in our life feel like those of little faith. We are plagued with doubt. Lord, we are doubters. Like Thomas we line up, uncertain, and fall into unbelief. Yet, Lord, we know that faith comes by hearing your word and by believing your word. So, Spirit of God, we pray that you would come and fill this place and fill our hearts. As we experience and hear your word, Lord, we pray that fresh faith would be kindled in our hearts and in our souls. Lord, we would not be men and women of little faith, but of big faith. We would not be men and women who doubt you, but trust you in all things. Make us that kind of disciple, we pray, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

I distinctly remember when I was a little kid going to the pool in Spring City, where I grew up. I would stare at that pool and I would stare at that water. I’d say this: “I believe. I believe. I don’t doubt. I’m gonna do this. This time it’s going to work. Jesus, I believe. I believe. I believe.” Then I would step onto that water and – sploosh! – I would sink every time. So I’d get back out – “I must

have doubted.” “I believe! I believe!” Sploosh. Never could do it. Still haven’t been able to pull this one off.

You know, when we read our Bibles, we see some incredible things happen by faith. We want to claim them and we want to grow in our faith. Yet even with that childlike faith, I said, “Lord, I didn’t doubt you, but it didn’t happen.” It raises these questions in children’s minds, but sometimes it raises these questions in our minds: Does faith really work? Can God really accomplish what he says he’s going to do? Is faith like magic, so that I can just do whatever I want if I believe enough? That’s some of what we have to wrestle with as we go through this series on faith -- **how we grow in our faith and how we walk by faith with the Lord.** Because we don’t want to be doubters. We don’t want to be weak-faith men and women, but we also don’t want to presume that we’re God and we can control the world by whatever we think, right?

George Mueller was a great evangelist and minister of the 1800’s. He lived between 1805 and 1898 in England. Incredible man of faith. He wrote an autobiography which told how he built entire orphanages and cared for literally over 10,000 orphans. He built over 117 schools. He educated over 120,000 children. And listen to this: He never asked for a dime in his whole ministry. He just prayed, and God funded the whole thing. He did this exercise because he said, “I want to show the Church the power of faith -- what God can do if we really trust him and believe in him.”

I encourage you to study his life. It is littered with miracles, literally. They are in a boat and there is fog. They’re going to have to pull over. He says, “No, no, no -- let me just pray,” and the fog lifts. They go and then captain gets converted in the moment. Incredible things happen because of this man of faith. Once I was reading one of his texts on faith where he talked about the nature of faith. I’m going to listen to a guy like this, alright? I’m going to listen to Jesus, but anyone in Church history that does incredible things by faith, I want to hear.

He made a distinction that helped me on the front end of this message, before we drop into the text. He said, “I like to distinguish between the grace of faith and the gift of faith.” He said, “The grace of faith is what we all have to have and we don’t have it apart from the grace of God. We are saved by grace through faith. It comes to us and we need faith to trust God for tomorrow and all the good things that he’ll provide for us. That’s a faith that’s commanded and we’ve got to have it. We’ve got to walk by faith.”

But then he said in 1 Corinthians 12-14, there is this gift of faith. There is this gift of faith that comes to you where the will of God is placed in your soul. And God says to someone like Peter: “Come out onto the water.” Faith comes and says, “This is the will of God,” and the supernatural occurs. **The faith of God and the will of God converge in the gift of faith and it accomplishes incredible things.**

That’s some of what Brian was wrestling with last week about engaging God and seeking to discern his will. It wasn’t God’s will for me, Stefan, in Spring City, to walk on water the way it was for Peter. It’s a little more complicated than just believing anything and everything. **In this passage I think we discover six ways to grow in our faith, overcome doubt, and seek to discern the will of God for our lives so that we can be men and women of great faith.**

We are going to discover six ways to grow in our faith and overcome doubt. The first is this: The way to grow in your faith and overcome doubt is to obey Jesus unconditionally.

I. Obey Jesus unconditionally.

Look at verses 22-23. This is after he fed the 5000 and sends the disciples off in the boat. Look at this: “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...” Notice the way that Matthew describes this in verse 22. “Immediately he made them get into the boat and go before him to the other side.”

You and I already know what’s going to happen, right? They’re going to get caught in a storm. If you didn’t know, I’ll describe it and we’ll see it in a minute. The wind is going to be against them. They’re going to be rowing. It’s going to be hard. They are trapped in this thing and here’s what I’m thinking if I’m Matthew or Peter or all these guys: “Jesus made me do this! He made me get into this boat. He made me get in here and he’s not even in the boat with me. He stayed back to pray, dismissed the crowd, and here I am – trapped in a storm. Why? Because Jesus made me do it. I’m here in this boat because of you, Jesus!” Right? “I’m here because I listened to you, because I’m following you, because I trusted you. I obeyed you and now I’m in a storm.”

If you want to grow in your faith and overcome doubt, the first thing you need to believe is that you’re right where you are because you are following Jesus unconditionally. Sometimes we pit these

two things against one another: faith and obedience, as though they're different. Sometimes somebody will say to me, "I think the Lord wants me to do this," and it is completely contrary to his word. "Jesus told me." No, he didn't. No, he didn't. He has spoken to you through his word and he doesn't speak to you contrary to his word. **Faith and obedience go together.** They are like two pedals on a bike. You push down on faith and obedience comes up and wants to be pressed down. That's how we move forward in the Christian life.

As I was preparing this message, an old hymn I sang as a child came to my mind. Those of you who grew up singing hymns might remember it. It's called: "Trust and Obey." Remember that?

*When we walk with the Lord in the light of His Word,
What a glory He sheds on our way!
While we do His good will, He abides with us still,
And with all who will trust and obey.*

*Trust and obey, for there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.*

The life of faith, the life of trusting Jesus starts with obeying Jesus. "Jesus, you're Lord, and I trust you because I believe that you're right and what you have for me is right." **When you're in the storm, you want to know that Jesus has placed you there -- not your foolish decisions, not your disobedience.** So the first way to grow in faith and overcome doubt is to obey Jesus unconditionally.

Secondly, the way to grow in your faith and overcome doubt is to look for Jesus in the storm.

II. Look for Jesus in the storm.

Verses 24 and 25: "...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.*" Whoa. Picture that. The fourth watch of the night, by the way, is somewhere between 3:00 and 6:00 am. These guys have been rowing hard through the first watch, through the second watch, through the third watch, exhausted. John and Mark, who also record this, say that Jesus actually sees them while he's praying, rowing hard. They are being overcome. He's like, "I better go out to these guys now." On the fourth watch of the night Jesus shows up to deliver them!

So remember our first point: **They are there because Jesus has placed them there. Where has Jesus placed you?** But here's the thing. As believers sometimes, especially in American Christianity, we often think that if there's a storm, it's not faith. We think that God wants to bless you with your best life now. It's going to be easy if you come to him. He'll fix it all up. He'll make it easier. If your life is hard, then somehow you're out of whack. But that's not the way Jesus presents the Christian life.

Jesus comes to you in the storm. Jesus doesn't promise you a storm-free life. He promises you that through the storm, your house is the house built on the firm foundation. Your house will stand. Even though everybody is going through storms and their house falls, your house stands. Why? Because you're on Jesus. Jesus meets you in the storm.

The way you overcome doubt and unbelief is to expect and anticipate the storm. Then you look for Jesus and you wait for Jesus through the first watch, and the second, and the third, because Jesus will find you and come to you. Keep rowing. Jesus will come to you in the midst of the storm. The promise of the Christian life is not a storm-free life. It's a Jesus-coming-to-you life. He is with you always – to the end of the world, even especially in the storm. Jesus comes to you. Look for Jesus in the storm. The eyes of faith say, "Jesus, where are you? I need you," and holds on through the storm.

Thirdly, the way that we overcome doubt and grow in our faith:

III. Do not fear the unknown.

Verses 26 and 27: "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.'" All sorts of questions come up in my mind when I read this. The first is: Are there ghosts? Are these guys superstitious? I don't know. We'll put some agnostics on it. I don't know what's going on there. "It's a ghost!"

But here's what happens. When we don't know something, when we don't know the future – tell me if this isn't true -- doesn't your mind immediately imagine the worst case scenario? Or you come up with five worst case scenarios, like: "My kids will probably die." We have many opportunities in this move to come up with a lot of worst case scenarios. We're not going to find a house we like. Our

kids are going to go to a terrible school. They are probably going to end up using drugs. It's going to be a horrible thing. The church is going to collapse. My preaching is going to stink.

When we don't know something, fear and unbelief paint a picture and paint it as the worst

possible thing. "It's a ghost! It's going to kill me!" I have a little pain -- it's probably cancer. We fear. We look into the future, not with faith. We don't expect to see Jesus there waiting for us. We expect to see a demon, a ghost, to come and take us out. We thought this was bad. It's about to get worse, right? That's not faith. That's unbelief. We need to call that out, church.

When our minds start racing and we think of the unknown, faith looks to the future and the

promises of God. Faith looks to the future at that city that God is preparing for us, the room that Jesus is preparing for us. Faith says, "Even death can't kill me because Jesus has killed death." Faith looks to the future and says, "Even if I have cancer, Jesus has killed cancer. I'm going to be risen again." Faith says that I can go to the nations and spread the gospel. Even if I lose my life, it's the most glorious thing because I spread the word of Jesus. I probably won't, but even if I do, it's okay because faith lays hold of the promises of God. It runs forward and says, "God, you are with me in the storm. You are going to meet me through the storm. I don't have a nickel or a dime, but I'm going to build an orphanage. By God, I'm going to pray it into reality and it's going to happen." And you know what happens? It happens.

Sometimes people say, "You don't really think you can do x, y, z, do you?" You know, I do First Priority on 221 schools? We just added one more school. We see thousands of students come to Christ every year. Thousands. Every week I'm in the school preaching the gospel, giving out Bibles. We ordered 6000 Bibles to last for the year and they were gone by Christmas. So we ordered 4000 more. I go up to Philly -- "You can't do that! You can't go into the schools." Well, we're doing it! "Oh, that will never work up here." Not with that attitude it won't. Right? Faith. Faith! Where is your faith? You of little faith. Why did you doubt? God can do so much more than we imagine or think. I can imagine a lot. Faith. Don't fear the unknown. Don't think of the worst case scenario.

Faith looks to the future with hope.

Fourthly, how do we grow in our faith and overcome doubt?

IV. Ask the Lord for confirmation.

Verse 28: “And Peter answered him, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.’” My imagination goes with this one too. Peter is asking for a confirmation. “Lord, is it you? I thought it was a ghost, but if it’s really you, here’s how I want you to prove it: Tell me to come to you.” “Yes, come on out, boy!” Sorry. I mean, “Lord, if it’s really you, what’s my favorite color? What did we have for dinner last Thursday?” I think it is bold faith for Peter to ask for that as his confirmation. I mean, Peter gets a lot of flack for this. But listen, Matthew, who wrote this, is in the boat and he’s probably just shivering in his boots, saying, “It really is a ghost, Peter. Shut up.” You know? “We’ve got to get through this!” Peter is the one that says, “Lord, if it’s you, here’s how I want you to prove it. If this is you, Lord, prove it to me.”

As I was meditating on this, my mind went to Gideon in Judges, chapter 6. Do you remember this powerful story? Israel is a mess. They are worshipping false gods. It’s a further and further descent. Even Gideon isn’t a great character overall to emulate, but he is a man of faith. God calls him. He’s like the least of his household, from the least of the tribe. He says, “I’m going to use you to deliver God’s people.” He’s like, “Lord, no way. This can’t happen.” “Alright, I’ll try.” He tears down the false altars. All of Israel gets mad at him for tearing down Baal’s altar and all this stuff. But he stands his ground and God raises him up. He says, “Alright, now go oppose the enemies that are persecuting God’s people. You’re going to win, Gideon. I’m going to be with you.”

Gideon says, “Alright, Lord. You’ve been with me this far, but I just need some confirmation. I think I’m hearing clearly from you, but I’m going to put a fleece out.” Have you heard of this? The fleece. He says, “I’m going to put a fleece out at nighttime. If the fleece is wet and the ground is dry, I’ll know it’s you.” The Lord says, “Fair enough.” The next morning he pulls up the fleece and wrings it out into a bowl and fills the bowl with water. The ground is completely dry. He says, “Lord, don’t let your anger be kindled against me. I just need it one more time, Lord, just to make sure. Let me flip this around. If the fleece is dry and the ground is wet, then I’ll know it’s you. I just need a second confirmation.” The Lord says, “Fair enough.” The Lord is patient with us. The next morning he wakes up. The fleece is completely dry and the ground is soaked with dew. “Alright, Lord, it’s you.” Boom – goes out – victory!

That brings me encouragement because what it says here is that even when God tells you something, “Lord, if this is you, before I jump headlong...before ‘I believe, I believe, I believe’ – sploosh – I just need you to confirm a few things for me.” And God is patient with that. **God is patient with us and he answers those confirmations.**

One of the things that has built complete faith for my wife and me in this transition is a list of 10 things I prayed for. I said, “Lord, I’m happy here. I’ll stay here. I’ll serve you till you take me to glory here. But if you’re calling me back to Philly, these things – I need all of them. Not like nine of them -- all of them.” I was picky, alright? This is what I think if it’s you. And he answered all of them. At that point, my wife was freaking out. The Lord answered my prayer. We have to go. This is God.

Humanly speaking, this doesn’t happen. The Lord has confirmed it. So if you’re unsure, before you dart headlong, “The Lord has told me! This is faith!” ask him: “Lord, if this is you...” Don’t use that for unbelief. Don’t use that if God has told you or if it’s clear in his word. Don’t say, “Lord, if you don’t want me to sin, then have someone come knock on my door in 10 minutes. Otherwise I’m going out to that party.” Not that kind of confirmation.

You hear what I’m saying. **The Lord is faithful to confirm what he has called you to do.** Ask for confirmation: “Lord, if it’s you, call me to come out of the boat.”

Six ways to grow your faith and overcome doubt. The fifth way: Get out of the boat.

V. Get out of the boat.

Verse 29: “He (Jesus) said, ‘Come.’ So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus.” This is where faith matters. This is where the rubber hits the road, right? It’s one thing to say, “I believe.” It’s another thing to get out of the boat. Could you imagine if Jesus had called you to do that, to feel every time you’ve stepped into water your whole life -- sploosh – and you feel that wave and it holds you up? You take another step and it holds you up. **Faith sometimes is scary.** If you’re living your life by always playing it safe, and you can explain everything in natural human terms, then you’re probably not living a big life of faith, because **faith does take risks.** Faith expects the supernatural. Your life is inexplicable unless this is true.

Your friends should look at your life and say, “His life makes no sense unless this is true.” Because I’m living for a different standard. I’m not living by sight; I’m living by faith.

Have you ever gone rappelling down a mountain? You harness up and there is that instant where you push off? Raise your hand if you’ve done that before. Alright, this illustration stinks. No one knows what I’m talking about. The feeling for the five of you who’ve done this before – when you stick your body over the edge of a cliff and your heart is beating out of your chest because

everything in you screams: “What are you doing?! You’re an idiot! People who stick their bodies over cliffs fall!” Then all of a sudden, it holds you. That’s the feeling of big faith that overcomes doubt. It goes over the cliff. It steps out of the boat and says, “Jesus, I’m going to trust you. In the storm. When the waves are all around me. When I’m already tired, I’m going to step out and come to you.”

What does it mean for you right now to hear the voice of Jesus and to get out of the boat? What is that step of faith that Jesus is calling you to take, to do great things for him? But fear and doubt, little faith, unbelief is holding you back. Jesus is calling you. **The life of faith hears the voice of Christ, asks for confirmation, receives it, and then gets out of the boat.**

The sixth and final way that we can grow in our faith and overcome doubt is to keep our eyes on the Lord.

VI. Keep your eyes on the Lord.

Verses 30-33:

But when he (Peter) 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.”

I’m sympathetic to Peter; I’ve already said that. Little faith?! He just got out and walked on water! But here’s the point. **Peter was doing great when he had his eyes on Jesus.** When he said, “Lord, let me come to you,” notice from the text what happened. Verse 30: “When he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out...”

You know what I find in my life? Even with this move (I’ll bring that back in) I’m doing fine as long as my eyes are fixed on Jesus. The moment I look at the wind, I’m sunk. “What about this? What about that?” They want us to fix what in our house? If you guys just sold a house you know. How are we going to find ____? What are we going to ____? Do we have enough money? You start to stare at the wind instead of looking at Jesus. That’s where faith diminishes. That’s where the big faith shrinks and becomes little faith. That’s when the courage becomes doubt.

So the final piece to this puzzle out of this text this morning – there’s so much more that could be said about faith – but it’s so clear that when we fix our eyes on Jesus, our faith grows and we overcome doubt. **When we stare at the wind and the waves and the storm, we start to sink.**

But here’s the good news. Even as you take those baby steps of faith, Jesus is there to lift you up, to pull you up. Because according to Hebrews, he’s the author and the perfecter of your faith. Jesus is the one that gets it started and Jesus is the one that will complete it, which is all the more why you need to not look at your faith. You need to look at Jesus.

Because, Church, there is one other twisted thing that we do with faith in the Church. I call it faith in faith. You know what I’m talking about? “You don’t have enough faith! You’ve got to look inward more. You’ve got to find the resources.” It’s this hyper-introspection that says, “I need to muster something from within me.” But biblical faith looks up and out. **Biblical faith looks to Jesus and he gives you the faith that you need.**

The faith you need comes from the Son of God. Truly he is the Son of God. And the only reason we’ll walk on any water is because he walked on it first. So wherever you are in your faith -- maybe you’re a doubter with little faith, but you have it. I believe there are some here even this morning as I preach this message – you just need to start the life of faith. Because the Christian life of faith is from A to Z by faith, but you have to get started. **You don’t need just the gift of faith, meaning to do the supernatural. You just need the grace of faith to be saved. And here’s the good news: Jesus gives that to you by his grace as well.**

So I want to close with a prayer for faith, and we all need it. I want to pray for all of us. Let’s bow our heads and close our eyes.