

“Jesus’ Presence in the Boat”

Introduction: (Read John 6:16-21) This account is tucked between lots of discussion about bread. The chapter opens with Jesus’ 4th sign – the Miraculous Feeding of Five Thousand. After the miracle of Jesus walking on the stormy sea to rescue the disciples caught in a treacherous storm, John records Jesus’ Bread of Life discourse which gives depth to the miracle of multiplying loaves. There are several questions to ask before we study this event if we are to make right application to our lives today.

1. Is this one of John’s chosen “sign miracles” which he has chosen in order to fulfill his purpose for the gospel (cf. John 20:30-31). Some say that it is and others say that it isn’t because it is not labeled as a “miraculous sign” – in addition it is only privately witnessed by His disciples.

2. Why does John include this event at this place in his gospel narrative (the miracle of Jesus walking on the water in a violent storm to deliver the disciples to safety)? A subset of this question is – what, if any, relationship does this event have to the sign miracle of the feeding of the five thousand?

3. What actually took place that night on the Sea of Galilee? For this we will also look at the account in Mark 6:45-52 in order to gain some greater detail and context. We then will attempt to understand the theme or main point of emphasis as much from the details which John leaves out as from those he includes.

Does John Intend His Readers To Understand This As One Of The Miraculous Signs Of Jesus?

- The evidence for or against its inclusion seems to have to do with the scholars inferred criteria for the sign miracles of John. I don’t believe that we need to answer that question in order to understand and apply the events of this text rightly. Even the scholars who differ don’t seem to depend on their conclusion to understand what is meant here/what actually happened OR why it is included at this place in the gospel narrative.

- Having said that – I still believe that at the very least this event serves to accomplish John’s purpose for his gospel – especially for Jesus’ disciples and John’s readers – you and me (cf. John 20:30-31).

Why Does John Include The Miracle Of Jesus Walking On The Top Of A Stormy Sea In Order To Rescue His Disciples, At This Place In His Narrative And Without Explanation?

- In Mark’s account he gives some insight into the heart of the disciples with a concluding statement. In that statement Mark notes that once Jesus entered the boat the raging sea became completely calm **and** that Jesus’ disciples were completely amazed “**for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened**” (cf. 4:51-52).

- Mark makes no further mention of the miracle or the reaction of the disciples. However, though John also does not mention the event any further in his narrative, the connection between the events of John 6:16-21 and the preceding miracle and the following discourse may be found at the conclusion of the discourse in which Jesus declares Himself to be the bread of life. The things Jesus declares about Himself as the “bread of life” are so difficult that it has many of His disciples leaving Him by the end of His teaching. It is at that point that Jesus simply turns and asks the twelve if they want to leave too. Simon Peter, on behalf of Jesus’ disciples, in a moment of profound, Spirit birthed faith responds simply saying, ““Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” (6:68-69 - NIV) Could it be that the very thing that serves as the catalyst to such a faith – in the face of such inexplicable, even off-putting teaching - is the disciples seeing Jesus walk on a raging sea just to be present with them, in the boat, during the storm, in order to miraculously get them to safety?

- Therefore - it seems that the single or main theme of this passage is Jesus’ presence – His saving and sufficient presence. It seems to be all about His perfect and ongoing awareness of our needs and His commitment to *be* effectually present in those needs. It is His willingness and ability to achieve “presence” in our lives at all cost - the relentless, saving, sufficient, compelling and rest giving nature of His presence – which I believe to be the theme teaching of this text. This “presence” is guaranteed in the hardest of times and sufficient for the needs – no matter how great – we might face in life. This point must be the point made AND in the context of Jesus sending/leaving us here in this fallen and antagonistic world for gospel purposes; the implications of Jesus’ incarnation for sympathy and for sufficiency – this is both at the level of caring for our temporal needs and wants, as well as paying the price necessary to conquer them at their root. As such it seems to augment the meaning of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand.

In 6:1-15 we established that Jesus cares about the hunger of the people and He fed them bread and fish. However, as we saw from the discourse to follow – the real point is that Jesus did not come primarily in order to provide bread that satisfies the hunger we experience in our bodies. Jesus came to *be* the bread of life for us – to be the full and deepest satisfaction for our souls.

In a similar way Jesus didn’t simply come to be present in life’s struggles in order to deliver us from the physical threat to safety and life – or even the anxiety which comes with those and other dangers or instabilities in this life. Jesus’ presence as the incarnate God and the gospel work He did provides the ultimate and complete deliverance from the power of death – with all of its implications – and deliverance into true “life” and “immortality” – with all that it means.

So – the real take away from our look at this passage is – *The highest purpose, the highest achievement of any circumstance or crisis/struggle, for the believer, is to experience the living presence of the Lord Jesus – as our all sufficient help, our hope and our greatest pleasure!!*

Note: In the light of the above preliminary considerations – let’s look at the actual events of that evening/night.

What Actually Took Place That Night On The Sea Of Galilee? – cf. John 6:16-21 – I want to walk through what actually happened as recorded in this text and, while we walk through the passage, I will make application to the bigger picture – the gospel picture and how it applies to us today.

- 6:16-17 – Understanding that John’s narrative is significantly less detailed than Mark’s – I will fill in our gaps in information from Mark while at the same time giving priority to John’s details for his purposes.

1. Jesus “withdrew to a mountain” in order to escape the Jews attempts to make Him “King” by force. Clearly this was a faulty, albeit contemporary, understanding of Messiah (cf. 6:14-15).

2. Jesus withdrew in order to spend time in Spirit led fellowship/prayer with the Father, while He sent the disciples on ahead of Him across the lake (cf. 6:16-17; also Mark 6:45-52).

Note: What this actually means is that the disciples are out on the lake, in a boat at night, by the will and at the direction of the Lord Jesus – *they were sent into that context*. This is a sovereign and intentional “sending” into what quickly becomes a dangerous context. According to the text - this was not the consequence of a foolish decision of the disciples.

Gospel Application: For the one who has come to faith in Jesus – we understand that we are now sent ones by the Lord Jesus. In fact we are to understand our lives to be on mission with Jesus (cf. John 17:9-19; 20:20-23; Matthew 28:16-18; Acts 1:7-8). We often get the sense that these passages apply primarily to missionaries serving overseas and somewhat to pastors. However, the principle is so clear in John 17:13-19 that the Lord Jesus is knowingly and with purpose leaving us – all who believe in Him - in a hostile world – a fallen world filled with danger, suffering, loss and death for all human beings but specifically for those who follow Him. *However, He continues in His ministry as our High Priest as He intercedes for us in our ministry* (cf. John 17:9-26).

- 6:18-20 – We have no way of knowing exactly how serious the storm was that night in the middle of the sea of Galilee but we do know that the storms on that “lake” can be very sudden and dangerous. It seems that night that the unpredictable, albeit well known and extremely

dangerous “perfect storm” of events, turns a fairly peaceful and easy journey to the other side of the lake into a dangerous/life threatening, frightening storm for which the boat and the disciples skill set were no match.

1. Jesus saw or was attentive to their circumstances (cf. Mark 6:47-48a). They certainly wouldn't have thought that Jesus was attending to them as they struggled alone in the middle of the storm that dark night – even though earlier they were in the boat with Him – when a serious storm hit unexpectedly Jesus was asleep in the boat. They woke Him and He spoke to the storm and it calmed down (cf. Mark 4:35-41).

2. Jesus came – He came to be present with them in their boat in the middle of a violent storm. His very presence was a saving present and a calming presence (cf. 6:19-21).

Gospel Application: Though the specific circumstances of struggle are often unpredictable in their nature, timing and detail – they are understood to be endemic to our “human condition.” When He saved us He knew the danger to us in this world – (cf. John 13-17). He could have immediately taken us out of the world into glory – the context of utter transformation from death to life, from danger to ultimate safety – and all that means. He did not – rather He left us here with the privilege of bearing His glory in the gospel to this world, as He did – ***Incarnationally!!***

This leaves us exposed to all of the threat of inherent danger, to the very real suffering and loss, and to the death which is a part of life in a hostile world characterized by all of the horrors of living in mortal bodies, among a fallen humanity and in a creation under the curse – Paul refers to it as the “reign of sin and death” (cf. Romans 5:12-21). ***This includes*** the threat of various natural dangers to our physical lives – various diseases, the very destruction decay brings to our minds and bodies, the inevitable death and loss and grief. ***In addition***, it includes the sinful and hate filled ways in which we treat each other. ***It also includes*** the injustices, the lies, the greed, the hunger for power, the exploitation, the agenda driven corruption and the hypocrisy which is so much a part of the everyday life among fallen people. ***It is a world*** of horrible instability much like that of the Sea of Galilee – a world or kingdom destined to be utterly shaken - according to the author of Hebrews (cf. 12:25-29). No matter how we might rationalize things - the boat in which we find ourselves (life in this world) and the skillset we and our culture brings to the storm – it is all woefully insufficient. The birth and death of nations and the cemeteries which cast a shadow over every crib – prove this to us. ***A quick trip to the cemetery or a moment of reminiscing about history – personal and corporate – leaves us, in the boat, with the storm raging and overcome with fear!!***

He did not leave us alone – as orphans (cf. John 14:15-27). It is at this moment that it becomes clear to us that Jesus was attentive to His disciples all along. This is the implication of Jesus as

our High Priest (John 17:9-19). He shows up – walking on the stormy waters and in the high winds which threaten us with destruction (cf. 6:19).

Note: This left the disciples confounded and disturbed. Their fear didn't allow them to see what they saw and to know what they should've known. It wasn't until Jesus identified Himself that they saw Him as He really is and wanted Him in the boat – ***His presence was what they wanted. He*** somehow eclipsed their fear and their thoughts of safety – ***It was He whom they wanted*** (cf. John 6:68-69).

- 6:21 – Once Jesus was in the boat they were immediately brought to safe harbor.

Application: This has powerful application to the life of the believer – in every context. Jesus paid the price to be with us profoundly, sovereignly, powerfully and incarnationally – which means NEVER SEPARATED – in each circumstance!!

1. This is a gospel accomplishment – the power and promise of the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and exaltation (cf. Romans 8:1-4, 5-12, 13-17, 18-27, 28-30, **31-39**).
2. This means that the great gift or promise of the gospel is that He came not to supply what we need ***but to be the supply of all of our needs!! Jesus is the gospel!!***
3. This means that He will never fail to be profoundly present with us ***in the storm*** enough to powerfully deliver us ***through the storm*** – even if the storm is our dying or our financial ruin or our heart breaking and inexplicable loss. ***Rather than see the waves of destruction and wonder at the overwhelming power to destroy of this struggle – which by the way renders Jesus unrecognizable – look for Him and hear Him say “take courage and be not afraid – It is I” or “I Am.”*** This is what Jesus promised (cf. John 14:1-6, 15-23), what Peter understood (cf. 1 Peter 1:3-8) and what Paul knew to be true (Romans 8:10-11, 31-32, 35-39).