

impossible faith

matthew 14.22-32

On Wednesday mornings we're in the middle of a series called *Impossible God*. The idea is that we serve a God who is so great and so vast and so high above us and He does incredible, impossible things in the heavens and the earth. But He also does impossible things in and through His people. That is undeniable as we look on the pages of Scripture. In the Bible we see God saying directly to His people that those things which seem impossible to us are possible with God and He delights in accomplishing things like that for our benefit and His glory. So, the idea is, if there's nothing *impossible* about our lives, perhaps we're missing some direction, some opportunity, some potential that God has intended for us.

Last week we looked at Daniel's life and his time in the lion's den and we talked about the kind of impossible devotion that we are able to pursue in our love for the Lord. Devotion that causes all other stresses and pursuits, even the pursuit of your own survival, to fade away. And we saw that devotion is the starting point because without real devotion to the Lord, no other spiritual things are going to advance in our lives. So we checked ourselves for that hunger for Christ in our devotion to Him.

But that isn't the end. Once we've determined to follow Jesus we're able to engage in other impossibilities. God's plan is to take us places. What we'll see this evening is that the next stop on our journey is our calling to an impossible faith.

4 times in the New Testament it is said explicitly that we, as Christians, are to **live** by faith. And all throughout God's word we see that lifestyle demonstrated and we see it illustrated and explained. But it's a command you and I have placed on our lives right now if we are believers in Jesus Christ.

Let me read you something that God said in Hebrews:

Hebrews 10.38 - Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.

That's a pretty serious statement. What we find is that, those who are justified, those who have devoted themselves to Christ are to *live* by faith. It is a *requirement* for a disciple.

Now, the good news is that God *gives* us faith. After all, the Bible says He is the the Author and Finisher of our faith. It's part of the armor that God has given us for this life. But, we're also told in the Scripture that we have a part to play. We are told to pursue faith. We're to add to our faith. Jude says in his epistle that we are to build up our faith.

Because of this arrangement, what we find in God's word and in our own experience is that many situations in our lives are actually opportunities God gives us to exercise faith. Because, faith untested isn't faith. Faith without works is dead. And God is in the business of exercising our faith.

Turn over to Matthew chapter 14 and we'll see a perfect example of this principle and potential and hopefully we'll get a decent look at what God is talking about when He commands us to live by faith.

Matthew 14.22-32 - 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.

Great passage and full of really huge implications for us as Christians. Because what we're seeing here is that God has provided us and called us to an impossible faith. And when I say impossible, I mean that it is something that only God can accomplish, something heavenly and supernatural. Something that cannot be synthesized in our own power.

There's a lot of different ways you could look at this passage. I saw one commentator who was focusing on the power of God to rescue His people. Spurgeon, in his sermon on this text, talks a lot about our doubt and how to deal with doubt in the Christian life. Another guy saw this passage as an analogy of the Church age and Jesus's second coming.

But what I want us to focus on this evening is that this whole thing was a structured exercise fashioned by Jesus to give the disciples an opportunity to put their faith into fantastic action. And what we see is that, of all the characters in the text, *one guy*, exercises impossible faith. And we need to walk away from this text today understanding that what Peter did was not a failure, it was fantastic. It was, I believe, what Jesus was getting at in this whole situation and it is a tangible example of how we are to live out our discipleship in this life.

Look at the set up in the text. Verse 22: Jesus **makes** them get into the boat and sends them alone to the other side of the sea. In the parallel telling of this story in Mark chapter 6 we learn that Jesus could see the guys in the boat and He was watching them straining at rowing in the storm. Verse 25 in our text: The third watch of the night. It's 3AM. Jesus has specifically waited 9 hours and *then* goes out to walk before them on the water. In Mark 6:48 we're told that He walked in such a manner so that they could see Him, but He '*would have passed them by*' had they not called out to Him and engaged in this exercise.

But, more importantly, remember that Jesus Christ commanded the wind and the waves. Back in Matthew chapter 8 the disciples found themselves in a similar situation. Only that time, the Lord was already with them in the boat. It's the passage where Jesus is sleeping and they go wake Him up and He calms the wind and the waves. But look at our text. Verse 32. The moment He hits the boat, the storm is over. It's like those scenes in movies where the heroes are in some crazy, high-tech battle simulation. Then, at the touch of a button, it's all over. Because this was all about the opportunity God was giving His devoted disciples to exercise their faith in His power. It almost feels like a batting cage, because of the kinds of things God wanted to do through these guys later on down the road.

Peter took this opportunity, and we want to learn from that. Because we're commanded to live our lives by faith. Not knowledge. Not probability. It's faith.

So, here's what happens. Jesus sends the guys over to the other side of the sea where they were going to continue their ministry there in the region. There was lots of preaching and teaching and baptizing and healing and feeding going on. They lived a very busy life for these 3 years. Now, in our text, Jesus had just fed the 5,000 with loaves and fish. They hadn't had time to eat. They hadn't had time to rest. They're were just full throttle. And it was time to go over to the next location. But along the way, Jesus was going to build up their faith a little and show them what kind of resources were available to them as disciples and give them a chance to step out in a remarkable way.

So He allows this storm. And this was a serious storm. This was a trip that many of these disciples would have made countless times as fishermen. Commentators point out that they would've stayed nearer to the shore since they were in a small vessel. But God drew them out into the deep, out into uncomfortable and uncontrollable waters and, seemingly, let them dangle a little bit.

God seems to do this from time to time in the Bible. Daniel *did* go into the lion's den. Joseph *did* go into the prison. Isaac *did* get put onto the altar. Lazarus *did* die from his illness. And God, in one sense, will let us dangle from time to time. Not in a cruel way, but in a way that purifies and tests our faith. We look back on all of those situations as glorious and wonderful and treasured, but those were very real situations for those individuals. And perhaps tonight you're in the middle of some sort of storm, or maybe it's something less threatening, maybe you have a decision to make and perhaps one or two of you here tonight feel like God is letting you dangle. A better phrase to think is that God is waiting. Because in those situations He comes and says, "Let's see what we can do together in this scenario. Let's see how I can be glorified and your faith can be built up. I've got a heavenly work that I want to do through your life either right now or later on down the road, so are you willing to take a few swings? Are you willing to live by faith?" This is what God does in our walk with Him.

Because if our faith is never exercised, then it's going to become simply knowledge. Things we know *academically* about God and about His Kingdom. But God calls us to more than knowledge. He calls us to application and participation.

So Jesus makes His way out to them on the sea and the guys just freak out. And I understand. I would've too. They're exhausted. They're scared. They're sleepless and hungry. But they wig out. They think they're seeing a ghost. But immediately, Jesus grabs their attention and says, "Guys, it's Me, you don't need to be afraid." Notice though, He doesn't calm any of the waves.

He doesn't stop the wind. It's interesting to think about how these moments played out. I tend to speculate that they miraculously were able to not row as they interacted with Jesus, despite what was around them. Because, remember, this is all a set up for what we're about to see Peter do.

So Jesus says, "Don't be afraid." In fact, He goes farther to say, "be of good cheer." Be happy! Be excited! Be motivated! "You guys should be excited about this opportunity you have and this unique situation that I've orchestrated!"

And Peter takes Jesus at His word. He says, "Ok Lord. Since You're clearly doing something here...command me to come to You on the water!"

Where did that come from?!? It wasn't "Lord, if it's You, stop this storm." It was, "Lord, if it's You, let's do something impossible. Let's walk on water together."

And this coming from a guy *without* the indwelling Holy Spirit! He's blowing my mind here. Between the time that Jesus starts talking to them on the sea and that moment when Peter starts sinking, it's like the storm isn't even happening. No one shouts out, "STOP THE STORM!" Instead this wonderful, impossible thing plays out.

And when I thought about Peter's request here, it made me wonder. Why didn't he ask the Lord to stop the waves? Why ask this? Again, commentators are quick to criticize Peter for being brash and over zealous and all the things we've heard a million times. But, personally and devotionally I think that Peter demonstrates what happens when a person truly devotes themselves to the Lord. We saw this when we looked at Daniel's life, but when a person is devoted to Christ, then all they care about is being with Christ. Pleasing Him. Peter says, "You're on the water, so command me to come out on the water." And the Lord says, "Come on out!" And Peter does it. Nevermind the impossibility. Nevermind the fact that his very survival was at stake. Peter was hungry for the Lord and for God's power in his life. And he swings his leg over the side of the boat and finds himself standing on the surface of the water. This is what this was all about.

The New Living Translation renders Jesus' words to the disciples in a slightly different way that I think will help us as we think about this stuff. He said,

Mark 6:50b - ..."Don't be afraid," he said. "Take courage! I am here!"

So Jesus stands there, in this moment in time, and says, "Take courage. TAKE IT!" And Peter did. He participated in this exercise. And he walked on the water. And that is a remarkable thing.

Now, in verse 30 of our text we see Peter take his focus off of Christ and puts it back onto the storm. He starts to sink. I think sometimes we spend too much time focusing on that. I mean, we should marvel at the fact that he actually did it! And, it's interesting to think that only 1 man in history other than the God-Man did this. Yet, any of the disciples *could* have.

But, it is a part of the story that Peter started to sink. There, Jesus intervenes and shows once again that this was all an exercise. He grabs Peter, talks to him about his faith and then gets in the boat, ending the storm and they get back on their way to the shore to the destination and

the work that awaited them, where life and ministry continued. But imagine for a moment how different that next day was for all the disciples and especially for Peter, the man who was so filled with God's power that he walked on water. A man who knew first hand that nothing was impossible for the God that he served.

So now we need to bring all this stuff home to where we live.

This text is an example of how we are supposed to live our lives as disciples. Charles Spurgeon once said in a sermon:

“The whole Christian life is a series of miracles, wonders linked into wonders, in one perpetual chain.”

And I'm inclined to believe that. Because God has said in His word that our whole lives are to be lived by faith that He's planted in our hearts. And we're to exercise that faith. We're to add to it and build it up. And we do that by seeing the opportunities Jesus brings to our lives to apply our faith. By moving from knowing something about Jesus to taking a step toward Him.

These guys knew Jesus could control the wind and the waves. But only **1** of them took a step toward Christ out of the boat.

And, here's the thing, we don't need to go find a storm or find a trying situation. Jesus orchestrated all of this and set this up. Remember, He had given them instructions and sent them toward a destination. He said, “We're going to go over there to the other side and we're going to do ministry.” And that's the idea. God gives us a course in this life. He gives us things to do. As husbands and fathers and employers and employees. We're living the life He's made for us. But all along the way, God wants to use various situations as opportunities for us to add to our faith. And, though they may be trying or uncomfortable, we're absolutely free from fear. We don't have to be afraid. Because we know what God is capable of and we know that He's holding us in His hands.

What we should do is respond in faith like Peter did.

First - press on. Life isn't easy, but Peter was devoted to the Lord. He was willing to follow Him in ministry. Think about the multitudes. They heard Jesus preach. They were fed by Him. They had been in His presence. But at the end of the day, they went home. They didn't follow. They didn't devote themselves to Him. Peter did. And even when the night got tough, Peter pressed on. He kept rowing, even after 9 hours on the sea.

Second - don't let these heavenly opportunities pass you by. Like we said, when Mark tells this story he mentions that Jesus would have passed them by on the water. And I think this is where most of our opportunities get missed. When we're living life but not *looking* for Jesus. Not *looking* for opportunities to serve or to step out or to spread the Gospel or even to just take a few swings in the batting cage of faith. And we need to understand that every moment is potentially a life-changing exercise for us. It is potentially the moment where God could add to our faith for future use, or it could be a moment where God intends to use us to turn the world upside down. But if we're too distracted or too doubtful or too discouraged to see Jesus when He puts that person in our path or opens up that opportunity, then that opportunity is going to pass us by. That person is going to move on. That moment will be lost.

Peter *could've* said, "Lord, if it's You, stop this storm." But think of what he would've missed. Peter understood that Jesus had power. He understood that Jesus was the Holy One of God. He wasn't perfect, but he didn't downgrade Jesus. And he wasn't trying to sail through life at the lowest common disciple denominator. He didn't say, "Oh come on Lord. Can't we just get to the other side? Do we really need this lame exercise?" He saw this opportunity and he responded to it. And he was focused on the fact that if he saw Jesus doing it, then *he* wanted to do it. "Lord, You're walking on water, so *I* want to walk on water." That's what Peter was about.

Likewise, we should have a passion for doing what Jesus did. Preaching the Gospel. Showing love. Feeding the hungry. Honoring God. Telling people that there is salvation and hope for their lives. Looking for new ventures of ministry and outreach. Testing the waters and the soil and looking for places to go and people to reach. Looking into God's word and figuring out what business Jesus is in then getting into that business.

Third - Peter waited for Jesus' command and direction. He said, "You command me and I'll do it." So often what are called steps of faith are really just people doing what they want to do without any real direction from the Lord. It's like when the Israelites prayed to God and said, "God, we're going to attack this enemy over here, should we go right or left." God answered and said, "I guess you should go left." The Israelites were defeated. So they come back to the Lord and say, "Ok, Lord, do *YOU* want us to go to battle or do you want us to do something else."

Sometimes people talk about having faith but pair it with blind ambition or reckless activity. Biblical faith isn't just about doing something crazy and seeing if God will honor it. Peter waited for clear direction and clear command. But then, when that direction came, he did it. He took the courage God offers us and he took the impossible step. And God met him there with power.

When he slipped, when he stopped focusing on Jesus, he started to sink and, in response, he called out to the Lord. I mean, Peter just hits a home run here. He met his devotion with a faith that seems impossible, but it's the faith that's available to all of God's people, it's the faith that God intends for each of His disciples.

If we cannot pinpoint moments where we are taking steps of faith, then we are not living the life we're commanded to live. That's the deal. If we're never doing things for God that cause our nerves to wrack every now and then, then we're not Peter. Maybe we're like the other 11 disciples. Just trying to ride it out. Just trying to get through to the end. When we do that we're missing out on the gift of faith and the power of God that He's waiting to give us. And we're missing out on 2 other things: first, the preparation that God is trying to add into our lives for future use in the Kingdom and second, the opportunity to change the world or change someone's eternal destiny.

We are called to live by faith. It seems a high mountain to climb until we look at what that means in God's word. The way to accomplish that calling is simply to look to Jesus and say, "Lord, I'm willing. I want to see the opportunities you bring me. Command me and I will take the step into the impossible."