

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
6:15-21

15. When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force to make him a king, he departed again to a mountain himself alone. 16. Now when evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, 17. entered into a boat, and went over the sea toward Capernaum. And it was now dark, and Jesus had not come to them. 18. And the sea arose because a great wind was blowing. 19. So when they had rowed about five and twenty or thirty furlongs, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near the boat; and they were afraid. 20. But he said to them, It is I; do not be afraid. 21. Then they willingly received him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land where they were going.

15.--[*When Jesus therefore perceived.*] This would be more literally rendered, "Jesus knowing," or "having known." It seems to imply Divine knowledge of the multitude's secret intentions. Jesus knew men's hearts and thoughts.

[*That they would come.*] This would be more literally, "that they are about to come."

[*Take him by force...king.*] The intention or wish was probably to place Him at their head and proclaim Him their king, with or without His consent, and then to hurry Him away to Jerusalem so as to arrive there at the passover feast and announce Him as a Deliverer to the crowd assembled at that time. The idea evidently in their mind was, that one who could work such a mighty miracle must be a mighty temporal Redeemer, raised up, like the Judges of old, to break the bonds of the Romish government and restore the old independence and kingdom to Israel. There is no reason to suppose that there was any more spiritual feeling in the minds of the multitude. Of sense of spiritual need and of faith in our Lord as a Savior from sin, there is no trace. Popularity and the good opinion of excited crowds are both worthless and temporary things.

Rollock remarks that the Jews were very sensitive about the tyranny and dominion of the Romans, while they did not feel the far greater tyranny and dominion of sin. He points out that we who are expecting the second advent of Christ in the present day should take care that we increasingly feel the burden and yoke of sin from which Christ's second advent will deliver the creation. Otherwise, Christ's second advent will do us no more good than His first advent did to the Jews.

[*He departed...a mountain...alone.*] This would be more literally rendered "the mountain" as at verse 3. St. Matthew and St. Mark both mention another reason why our Lord withdrew to the mountain, beside His desire to avoid the intention of the multitude. They tell us that He "sent the multitude away and departed to pray." (Matt. xiv.23; Mark vi.46.)

Some think that a miracle must have been wrought when our Lord withdrew

himself from the multitude, and that He must have passed through them invisibly, as after the miracle at Bethesda and at Nazareth. Yet it seems hardly necessary to suppose this.

It is worth noticing that after St. Luke's account of this miracle, he immediately relates that our Lord asked the disciples, "Whom say the people that I am?" (Luke ix.18.) It does not, however, follow that He asked immediately, but after an interval of some days. But the wish of the multitude here related may have occasioned the question.

16.--[*When evening...to the sea.*] St. Matthew and St. Mark both say that our Lord "constrained" them to embark in the boat and depart. He "obliged" or "compelled" them. He probably saw that in their ignorance of the spiritual nature of His kingdom, they were ready to fall in with the wishes of the multitude and to proclaim Him a king.

17.--[*Entered into a boat.*] This would be more literally "the boat." It seems to mean that particular vessel or fishing boat which our Lord and His disciples always used on the lake of Galilee, and which probably was lent for His use by the relatives of those of His disciples who were fishermen, if not by the four themselves, viz., James, John, Andrew, and Peter. There is no necessity for supposing that when they left their calling to become disciples they gave up their boats so entirely as to have no more use of them when they wished. The last chapter of this very Gospel seems to prove the contrary. When Peter said, "I go afishing," there was the boat ready for them at once. (John xxi.3.)

[*Went over the sea toward Capernaum.*] This would be more literally "were going," "were in the act of going." Capernaum lay on the northwest shore of the lake of Galilee, and the point where the disciples embarked was on the northeast shore. To reach Capernaum, they would pass the point where the Jordan ran into the lake and leave that point and the town of Bethsaida on their right hand. The place where the miracle was wrought was not at Bethsaida itself, we must remember, but in the desert country and district lying to the east of Bethsaida. St. Luke specially mentions this (Luke ix.10), and unless we keep it in mind, we shall not understand St. Mark's words that our Lord made His disciples "go to the other side before unto Bethsaida." To go to Capernaum, they must need go "in the direction of" Bethsaida, though they would leave it on the right as they passed. Thomson, in the "Land and the Book," maintains this view, and Rollock, 250 years ago, held the same opinion.

I repeat the opinion that I see no necessity for the theory of Alford and other commentators that there were two Bethsaidas.

Capernaum was the city where our Lord passed more time, and probably worked more miracles, than He did in any other place during His ministry. This is probably the reason why our Lord speaks of it as "exalted unto heaven." (Matt. xi.23.) No city had such privileges and saw so much of the Son of God while He was manifest in the flesh.

[*It was now dark...not come.*] The Greek word for "dark" is always rendered "darkness" in other places, except John xx.1. The simple circumstance of

the disciples being alone in the boat, on the sea, and in darkness, has been felt in every age to be an instructive emblem of the position of the Church of Christ between the first and second advents. Like them, the Church is on a sea of trouble and separate from its Head. In estimating, however, the position and feelings of the disciples, we must not forget that four of them at least were fishermen and familiar from their youth with the management of boats and all the dangers of the lake. We must not therefore think of them as inexperienced landsmen or as little children unable to take care of themselves.

We learn to know the value of Christ's company when we have it by the discomfort we experience when we have it not.

18.--[*And the sea arose...blowing.*] The Greek word rendered "arose" would be more literally rendered "was being raised or stirred."

At first sight, it may seem surprising that the waters of an inland lake, like the sea of Galilee, could be so much agitated. But it is remarkable that the testimony of travelers in modern times is distinct that this lake is peculiarly liable to be visited by violent squalls of wind and to become very rough while they last. Thomson, the American traveler, says: "My experience in this region enabled me to sympathize with the disciples in their long night's contest with the wind. I have seen the face of the lake like a huge boiling cauldron. The wind howled down the valleys from the northeast and east with such fury that no efforts of rowers could have brought a boat to shore at any point along that coast. To understand the cause of these sudden and violent tempests, we must remember that the lake lies low (six hundred feet lower than the ocean), that watercourses have cut out profound ravines and wild gorges converging to the head of the lake, and that these act like gigantic funnels to draw down the cold winds from the mountains. On the occasion referred to, we pitched our tents on the shore and remained for three days and nights exposed to this tremendous wind. We had to double-pin all the tent ropes and frequently were obliged to hang with our whole weight upon them to keep the quivering tabernacle from being carried up bodily into the air. No wonder the disciples toiled and rowed hard all that night." In another place he says, "Small as the lake is and placed in general as a molten mirror, I have repeatedly seen it quiver and leap and boil like a cauldron, when driven by fierce winds."--*Land and the Book.*

Burkitt remarks that the position of the disciples--immediately tempest-tossed after witnessing and partaking in a mighty miracle--is an instructive type of the common experience of believers. After seasons of peculiar privileges, there often come sharp trials of faith and patience.

This sudden trial of faith by danger was no doubt intended to be a lesson to the disciples as to what they must expect in the exercise of their ministry. Affliction and crosses are the grindstones on which God is constantly sharpening those instruments which He uses most.

19.--[*So when...rowed...furlongs.*] We might gather from the disciples "rowing" and not sailing, that the wind was against them, and we are expressly told, both by St. Matthew and St. Mark, that "the wind was

contrary." From the distance they had rowed and the known width of the lake at that particular part of it, they were probably now about the middle of their passage. St. Matthew says they were "in the midst of the sea." (Matt. xiv.24.) This would make them at least two or three miles from shore, a fact which should be carefully noted with reference to what follows.

Let the expression "twenty-five or thirty" be noted. It is not necessary to define to a hair's breadth distances and quantities in narrating an event. Even an inspired writer does not. He uses the common language of men and such language as those present on the occasion would have used. In a dark night, they could not possibly have spoken with precise accuracy. John was there himself and knew that excessive accuracy is sometimes suspicious and looks like a made-up story. (John ii.6 is a similar expression.)

Bengel says, "The Holy Spirit knew and could have told John precisely how many furlongs there were. But in Scripture, he imitates popular modes of expression."

[*They saw Jesus walking, etc.*] This was undoubtedly as great a miracle as any that our Lord wrought.

"Moses," says Theophylact, "as a servant, by the power of God divided the sea. But Christ, the Lord of all, by His own power walked on the sea."

For a solid body to walk on the face of the water as on dry land is an entire suspension of what are called the laws of nature. It was, of course, as easy for Him by whom the waters were first created to walk upon them as to create them. But the whole proceeding was so entirely supernatural that we can thoroughly understand the disciples being "afraid." Nothing is found to alarm human nature so much as being suddenly brought into contact with anything apparently supernatural and belonging to another world, and especially in the night. The feelings called forth on such occasions, even in ungodly and irreligious men, are one of the strongest indirect proofs that all men's consciences recognize an unseen world.

That a mighty miracle really was wrought upon this occasion is the only reasonable account that can be given of the fact that we are told. St. Mark adds to St. John's account, that when Jesus came near the ship "He would have passed by them." (Mark vi.48.) St. Matthew adds another fact of even greater importance. He tells us that Peter said, "Lord, if it be Thou, bid me come unto Thee on the water. And He said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water to go to Jesus." (Matt. xiv.28,29.) Such a fact as this cannot possibly be explained away. Not only did our Lord walk on the water Himself, but He also gave one of His twelve apostles power to do the same.

To say in the face of such facts as these that there was in reality no miracle--that the disciples were mistaken, that our Lord was only walking on the shore near the vessel, that the superstitious fear of the disciples made them fancy that He was walking on the sea, that they finally put to

shore and took Him on board--to say such things as these pleases some persons who profess not to believe any miracles at all! But such views cannot possibly be reconciled with the account of what really happened, given by two witnesses, Matthew and John, who were actually present on the occasion, and by another writer, viz., Mark, who was intimate with that very Peter who walked on the water himself.

If the disciples were "in the midst of the sea" and two or three miles from shore, how could they possibly have seen our Lord walking on the shore?

If it was "dark" when these things happened, it stands to reason that they could not distinguish anyone on shore, even supposing that they were not two miles off.

If there was a heavy gale blowing and the waves were rough, it is absurd to suppose that they could hold a conversation with anyone walking on shore.

The plain truth is that it requires far more faith to accept such improbable and preposterous explanations as these than to take the whole account simply as we find it and to believe that a real mighty miracle was wrought. Unless men are prepared to say that Matthew, Mark, and John wrote accounts of the events of this night which are incorrect and not trustworthy, it is impossible for any honest and unprejudiced person to avoid the conclusion that a miracle took place. Of course, if Matthew, Mark, and John give incorrect accounts and are not to be trusted here, they are not to be trusted anywhere, and all their records of our Lord's doings and sayings become utterly worthless. This, unhappily, is the very result to which many would be glad to lead us. From denying all miracles to downright infidelity is nothing but a regular succession of steps. If a man begins with throwing overboard the miracles, he cannot stop logically till he has given up the Bible and Christianity.

20.--[*But He said...not be afraid.*] Our Lord's tenderness for His disciples' feelings appears beautifully here. No sooner does He see fear than He proceeds to calm it. He assures them that the figure they see walking on the deep is no spirit or ghost, no enemy or object of dread. It is their own beloved Master. His voice, well-known as it must have been, would, of course, help to calm their fears. Yet even that was not enough till Peter had said, "If it be Thou, bid me come to Thee."

The practical remark has often been made that many of the things which now frighten Christians and fill them with anxiety would cease to frighten them if they would endeavor to see the Lord Jesus in all, ordering every providence and overruling everything so that not a hair falls to the ground without Him. They are happy who can hear His voice through the thickest clouds and darkness, and above the loudest winds and storms, saying, "It is I; do not be afraid."

It has been thought by some that the words, "It is I," might be more literally rendered, "I am," and that they are intended to refer to the name of God so familiar to Jews, "I am." But I doubt the correctness of the idea. It is a pious thought but hardly in keeping with the context and the circumstances of the occurrence. Our Lord desired first to relieve the

fears of His disciples by showing them who it was that they feared, and the Greek words for "It is I" are the only words that He could well have used.

It may be noted here that there seems to be no feeling or passion to which Christians are so liable as "fear." There is none, certainly, against which our Lord so often exhorts His disciples. "Fear not," "be not afraid," "let not your heart be troubled," are very common sayings of His.

21.--[*Then they willingly received...boat.*] This would be rendered more literally, "Then they were willing," "they were glad and wished." It evidently implies that at first the disciples were afraid of our Lord. But as soon as they recognized Him, their fears departed, and so far from wishing to be rid of the figure they had seen walking on the sea, their great desire now was to receive Him on board.

[*Immediately...at the land...were going.*] This sentence either means that shortly after our Lord joined the disciples in the boat they reached their destination, or that immediately--by miraculous agency--they arrived at the shore. There is, perhaps, no occasion to suppose any other miracle. Both Matthew and Mark distinctly say that "the wind ceased" as soon as our Lord entered the boat. The storm, according to the custom of storms on the lake, suddenly ceased, and the disciples consequently had no trouble in rowing to the shore. The wind was no longer against them, and the sea, in so small a compass as the lake of Galilee, would naturally soon go down.

The old practical lesson still remains to be remembered. Christ's Church is now a tossed ship in the midst of a stormy sea. The great Master has gone up into heaven to intercede for His people, left alone for awhile, and to return. When Jesus returns again to His tossed and afflicted Church at the second advent, their troubles will soon be over. They will soon be in harbor. His voice, which will fill the wicked with terror, will fill His people with joy.

The place where they landed was evidently Capernaum, or close to it. The discourse which follows was at any rate finished (wherever it may have begun) in "the synagogue at Capernaum," and follows in unbroken succession after the events we have now been considering. The statement of St. Matthew and St. Mark, that our Lord and His disciples reached the shore in "the land of Genesaret," is quite reconcilable with St. John's account. The "land of Genesaret" was a plain on the northwest coast of the Lake of Galilee extending from Magdala at the south to Capernaum at the north.

In leaving this passage, I call the reader's attention to the very marked and peculiar position which the two miracles recorded by St. John in this chapter occupy. They immediately precede that wonderful discourse in the synagogue of Capernaum in which our Lord proclaims Himself to be "the living bread which came down from heaven and gives life to the world," and declares that, except we eat His flesh and drink His blood we have no life in us. I believe that the two miracles were intended to prepare the minds of the disciples to receive the mighty truths which the discourse contained. Did they stumble at the announcement that He was the "bread of God" and "gave life to the world"? It would surely help their weak faith to remember that the very day before they had seen Him suddenly supply the

needs of a mighty multitude with five loaves and two fishes. Did they stumble at the doctrine that "His flesh was meat indeed and his blood drink indeed"? It would surely assist their feeble spiritual apprehension to remember that the very night before they had seen that body walking on the face of the sea. They had had ocular proof that there was a deep mystery about our Lord's human nature, and that although He was real and true man, there was at the same time something about Him far above man. These things I believe are worth noticing. The connection between our Lord's miracles and His teaching is often far closer than at first sight appears.