

Exposition of the Gospel of John CHAPTER 21

CHRIST WALKING ON THE SEA

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Transcript

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John 6:14-27

We begin with our customary Analysis of the passage which is to be before us:— 1. The Response of the people to the miracle of the loaves: verses 14, 15. 2. The Retirement of Christ to the mount: verse 15. 3. The Disciples in the storm: verses 16-19. 4. The Coming of Christ to them: verses 20, 21. 5. The people follow Christ to Capernaum: verses 22-25. 6. Christ exposes their motive: verse 26. 7. Christ presses their spiritual need upon them: verse 27. The opening verses of the passage before us contain the sequel to what is described in the first thirteen verses of John 6. There we read of the Lord ministering, in wondrous grace, to a great multitude of hungry people. They had no real appreciation of His blessed person, but had been attracted by idle curiosity and the love of the sensational—"because they saw his miracles which he did on them that were diseased" (verse 2). Nevertheless, the Son of God, in tenderest pity, had supplied their need by means of the loaves and the fishes. What effects, then, did this have upon them? Christ had manifested His Divine power. There was no gainsaying that. The crowd were impressed, for we are told, "Then those men, when they had seen the miracle which Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that prophet which should come into the world" (John 6:14). The title "that prophet" has already been before us in John 1:21. The reference is to Deuteronomy 18:15, where we read that, through Moses God declared, "The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken." These men, then, seemed ready to receive the Lord as their Messiah. And yet how little they realized and recognized what was due Him as "that prophet"—the Son of God incarnate. Instead of falling down before Him as undone sinners, crying for mercy; instead of prostrating themselves at His feet, in reverent worship; instead of owning Him as the Blessed One, worthy of their hearts' adoration, they would "take him by force to make him a king" (John 6:15); and this, no doubt, for their own ends, thinking that He would lead them in a successful revolt against the hated Romans. How empty, then, were their words! How little were their consciences searched or their hearts exercised! How blind they still were to the Light! Had their hearts been opened, the light had shone in, revealing their wretchedness; and then, they would have taken their place as lost and needy sinners. It is the same today. Many there are who

regard our Lord as a Prophet (a wonderful Teacher), who have never seen their need of Him as a Refuge from the wrath to come—a doom they so thoroughly deserve. Let us not be misled, then, by this seeming honoring of Christ by those who eulogize His precepts, but who despise His Cross. It is no more a proof that they are saved who, today, own Christ as a greater than Buddha or Mohammed, than this declaration by these men of old—"This is of a truth that prophet which should come into the world," evidenced that they had "passed from death unto life." "When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force" (John 6:15). This is very solemn. Christ was not deceived by their fair speech. Their words sounded very commendable and laudatory, no doubt, but the Christ of God was, and is, the Reader of hearts. He knew what lay behind their words. He discerned the spirit that prompted them. "Jesus therefore perceived" is parallel with John 2:24, 25: "But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all, and needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man." "Jesus therefore perceived" is a word that brings before us His Deity. The remainder of verse 15 is profoundly significant and suggestive. "When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone" (John 6:15). These Jews had owned Him (with their lips) as Prophet, and they were ready to crown Him as their King, but there is another office that comes in between these. Christ could not be their King until He had first officiated as Priest, offering Himself as a Sacrifice for sin! Hence the doctrinal significance of "He departed again into a mountain himself alone," for in His priestly work He is unattended—cf. Leviticus 16:17! But there was also a moral and dispensational reason why Christ "departed" when these Jews would use force to make Him a King. He needed not to be made "a king," for He was born such (Matthew 2:2); nor would He receive the kingdom at their hand. This has been brought out beautifully by Mr. J. B. Bellet in his notes on John's Gospel:—"The Lord would not take the kingdom from zeal like this. This could not be the source of the kingdom of the Son of Man. The 'beasts' may take their kingdoms from the winds striving upon the great sea, but Jesus cannot (Dan. 7:2, 25). This was not, in His ear, the shouting of the people bringing in the headstone of the corner (Zech. 4:7); nor the symbol of His People made willing in the day of His power (Ps. 110:3). This would have been an appointment to the throne of Israel on scarcely better principles than those on which Saul had been appointed of old. His kingdom would have been the fruit of their revolted heart. But that could not be. And besides this, ere the Lord could take His seat on Mount Zion, He must ascend the solitary mount; and ere the people could enter the kingdom, they must go down to the stormy sea. And these things we see reflected here as in a glass." It should be noted that Matthew tells us how Christ "went up into a mountain apart to pray" (Matthew 14:23); so, too, Mark (Mark 6:46). The absence of this word in John is in beautiful accord with the character and theme of this fourth Gospel, and supplies us with another of those countless proofs for the Divine and verbal inspiration of the Scriptures. In this Gospel we never see Christ praying (John 17 is intercession, giving us a sample of His priestly ministry on our behalf in heaven: note particularly verses 4 and 5, which indicate that the intercession recorded in the verses that follow was anticipatory of Christ's return to the Father!), for John's special design is to exhibit the Divine glories of the Savior. "And when even was now come, his disciples went down unto the sea, And entered into a ship" (John 6:16, 17). Matthew explains the reason for this: "And straightway Jesus constrained his disciples to get into a ship, and to go before him unto the other side, while he sent the multitudes away" (Matthew 14:22). The Lord desired to be alone, so He caused the disciples to go on ahead of Him. It would seem, too, that He purposed to teach them another lesson on faith. This will appear in the sequel. "And entered into a ship, and went over the sea toward Capernaum. And it was now dark, and Jesus was not come to them" (John 6:17). What we have here, and in the verses that follow, speaks unmistakably to us. It describes the conditions through which we must pass as we journey to our Home above. Though not of the world, we are necessarily in it: that world made up of the wicked, who are like

"the troubled sea." The world in which we live, dear reader, is the world that rejected and still rejects the Christ of God. It is the world which "lieth in the wicked one" (1 John 5:19), the friendship of which is enmity with God (James 4:4). It is a world devoid of spiritual light; a world over which hangs the shadow of death. Peter declares the world is "a dark place" (2 Pet. 1:19). It is dark because "the light of the world" is absent. "It was now dark, and Jesus was not come to them." Sometimes Christ withholds the light of His countenance even from His own. Job cried, "when I waited for light, there came darkness" (Job 30:26). But, thank God, it is recorded, "Unto the upright there ariseth light in the darkness" (Ps. 112:4). Let us remember that the darkness is not created by Satan, but by God (Isa. 45:7). And He has a wise and good reason for it. Sometimes He withholds the light from His people that they may discover "the treasures of darkness" (Isa. 45:3). "Jesus was not come to them. And the sea arose by reason of the great wind that blew" (John 6:17, 18). This tested the faith and patience of the disciples. The longer they waited the worse things became. It looked as though Christ was neglectful of them. It seemed as though He had forgotten to be gracious. Perhaps they were saying, If the Master had been here, this storm would not have come up. Had He been with them, even though asleep on a pillow, His presence would have cheered them. But He was not there; and the darkness was about them, and the angry waves all around them—fit emblems of the opposition of the world against the believer's course. It was a real test of their faith and patience. And similarly does God often test us today. Frequently our circumstances are dark, and conditions are all against us. We cry to the Lord, but He "does not come." But let us remind ourselves, that God is never in a hurry. However much the petulance of unbelief may seek to hasten His hand, He waits His own good time. Omnipotence can afford to wait, for it is always sure of success. And because omnipotence is combined with infinite wisdom and love, we may be certain that God not only does everything in the right way, but also at the best time: "And therefore will the Lord wait, that he may be gracious unto you, and therefore will he be exalted, that he may have mercy upon you: for the Lord is a God of judgment: blessed are all they that wait for him" (Isa. 30:18). Sometimes the Lord "waits" until it is eventide before He appears in His delivering grace and power. The darkness becomes more gloomy, and still He waits. Yes, but He waits "to be gracious." But why? Could He not be gracious without this waiting, and the painful suspense such waiting usually brings to us? Surely; but one reason for the delay is, that His hand may be the more evident; and another reason is, that His hand may be the more appreciated, when He does intervene. Some times the darkness becomes even more gloomy, well-nigh unbearable; and still He waits. And again, we wonder, Why? All is it not that all our hopes may be disappointed; that our plans may be frustrated, till we reach our wit's end (Ps. 107:27)! And, then, just as we had given up hope, He breaks forth unexpectedly, and we are startled, as were these disciples on the stormlashed sea. "So when they had rowed about five and twenty or thirty furlongs, they see Jesus walking on the sea" (John 6:19). These lines will, doubtless, be read by more than one saint who is in a tight place. For you, too, the night is fearfully dark, and the breakers of adverse circumstances look as though they would completely swamp you. O tried and troubled one, read the blessed sequel of John 6:17, 18. It contains a word of cheer for you, if your faith lays hold of it. Notice that the disciples did not give up in despair—they continued "rowing" (verse 19)! And ultimately the Lord came to their side and delivered them from the angry tempest. So, dear saint, whatever may be the path appointed by the Lord, however difficult and distasteful, continue therein, and in His own good time the Lord will deliver you. Again we say, Notice that the disciples continued their "rowing." It was all they could do, and it was all that was required of them. In a little while the Lord appeared, and they were at the land. Oh may God grant both writer and reader perseverance in the path of duty. Tempted and discouraged one, remember Isaiah 30:18 (look it up and memorize it) and continue rowing! There is another thing, a blessed truth, which is well calculated to sustain us in the interval before the deliverance comes; and it will if the heart appropriates its blessedness. While the

storm-tossed disciples were pulling at the oars and making little or no progress, the Lord was on high—not below, but above them—master of the situation. And, as Matthew tells us, He was "praying." And on high He is now thus engaged on our behalf. Remember this, O troubled one, your great High Priest who is "touched with the feeling of your infirmities" is above, ever living to intercede. His prayers undergird you, so that you cannot sink. Mark adds a word that is even more precious—"And he saw them toiling in rowing" (John 6:48). Christ was not indifferent to their peril. His eye was upon them. And even though it was "dark" (John 6:17) He saw them. No darkness could hide those disciples from Him. And this, too, speaks to us. We may be "toiling in rowing" (the Greek word means "fatigued"), weary of the buffeting from the unfriendly winds and waves, but there is One above who is not unconcerned, who sees and knows our painful lot, and who, even now, is preparing to come to our side. Turn your eyes away from your frail barque, away from the surrounding tempest, and "look off unto Jesus, the author and finisher of faith" (Heb. 12:1). "So when they had rowed about five and twenty or thirty furlongs, they see Jesus walking on the sea, and drawing nigh unto the ship: and they were afraid" (John 6:19). This shows how little faith was in exercise. Matthew tells us, "And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled" (Matthew 14:26). Think of it, "troubled" and "afraid" of Jesus! Does some one say, That was because the night was dark and the waves boisterous, consequently it was easy to mistake the Savior for an apparition? Moreover, the sight they beheld was altogether unprecedented: never before had they seen one walking on the water! But if we turn to Mark's record we shall find that it was not dimness of physical sight which caused the disciples to mistake their Master for a spectre, but dullness of spiritual vision: "They considered not the miracle of the loaves: for their heart was hardened." Their fears had mastered them. They were not expecting deliverance. They had already forgotten that exercise of Divine grace and power which they had witnessed only a few short hours before. And how accurately (and tragically) do they portray us—so quickly do we forget the Lord's mercies and deliverances in the past, so little do we really expect Him to answer our prayers of the present. "But he saith unto them, "It is I; be not afraid" (John 6:20). This is parallel in thought with what we had before us in verse 10. The scepticism of Philip and the unbelief of Andrew did not prevent the outflow of Divine mercy. So here, even the hardness of heart of these disciples did not quench their Lord's love for them. O how deeply thankful we ought to be that "He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities" (Ps. 103:10). From beginning to end He deals with us in wondrous, fathomless, sovereign grace. "It is I," He says. He first directs their gaze to Himself. "Be not afraid," was a word to calm their hearts. And this is His unchanging order. Our fears can only be dispelled by looking in faith to and having our hearts occupied with Him. Look around, and we shall be disheartened. Look within, and we shall be discouraged. But look unto Him, and our fears will vanish. "Then they willingly received him into the ship: and immediately the ship was at the land whither they went" (John 6:21). Now that He had revealed Himself to them; now that He had graciously uttered the heart-calming "Be not afraid"; now that He had (as Matthew and Mark tell us) spoken that well-known word "Be of good cheer": they "willingly" received him into the ship." Christ does not force Himself upon us: He waits to be "received." It is the welcome of our hearts that He desires. And is it not just because this is so often withheld, that He is so slow in coming to our relief—i.e. "manifesting himself" to us (John 14:21)! How blessed to note that as soon as He entered the ship, the end of the voyage was reached for them. In applying to ourselves the second half of this twenty-first verse, we must not understand it to signify that when Christ has "manifested" Himself unto us that the winds will cease to blow or that the adverse "sea" will now befriend us; far from it. But it means that the heart will now have found a Haven of rest: our fears will be quieted; we shall be occupied not with the tempest, but with the Master of it. Such are some of the precious spiritual lessons which we may take to ourselves from this passage. "The day following, when the people which stood on the other side of the sea saw that there

was none other boat there, save that one whereinto his disciples were entered, and that Jesus went not with his disciples into the boat, but that his disciples were gone away alone; (Howbeit there came other boats from Tiberias nigh unto the place where they did eat bread, after that the Lord had given thanks:) When the people therefore saw that Jesus was not there, neither his disciples, they also took shipping, and came to Capernaum, seeking for Jesus" (John 6:22-24). The multitude, whose hearts were set on making the Miracle-worker their "king," apparently collected early in the morning to carry their purpose into effect. But on seeking for Jesus, He was nowhere to be found. This must have perplexed them. They knew that on the previous evening there was only one boat on their side of the sea, and they had seen the disciples depart in this, alone. Where, then, was the Master? Evidently, He who had miraculously multiplied five loaves and two fishes so as to constitute an abundant meal for more than five thousand people, must also in some miraculous manner have transported Himself across the sea. So, availing themselves of the boats which had just arrived from Tiberias, they crossed over to Capernaum, in the hope of finding the Lord Jesus there; for they knew that this city had, for some time, been His chief place of residence. Nor was their expectation disappointed. "And when they had found him on the other side of the sea, they said unto him, Rabbi, when camest thou hither? Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled" (John 6:25, 26). There was, perhaps, nothing wrong in their question, "Rabbi, when camest thou hither?" But to have answered it would not have profited them, and that was what the Lord sought. He, therefore, at once showed them that He was acquainted with their motives, and knew full well what had brought them thither. Outwardly at least, these people appeared ready to honor Him. They had followed Him across the sea of Galilee, and sought Him out again. But He read their hearts. He knew the inward springs of their conduct, and was not to be deceived. It was the Son of God evidencing His Deity again. He knew it was temporal, not spiritual blessing, that they sought. When He tells them, "Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles (or "signs") but because ye did eat of the loaves," His evident meaning is that they realized not the spiritual significance of those "signs." Had they done so, they would have prostrated themselves before Him in worship. And let us remember that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever." Christ still reads the human heart. No secrets can be withheld from Him. He knows why different ones put on religious garments when it suits their purpose—why, at times, some are so loud in their religious pretensions—why they profess to be Christians. Hypocrisy is very sinful, but its folly and uselessness are equally great. "Labor not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you" (John 6:27). The expression used here by Christ is a relative and comparative one: His meaning is, Labor for the latter rather than for the former. The word "labor" is very expressive. It signifies that men should be in deadly earnest over spiritual things; that they should spare no pains to obtain that which their souls so imperatively need. It is used figuratively, and signifies making salvation the object of intense desire. O that men would give the same diligence to secure that which is imperative, as they put forth to gain the things of time and sense. That to which Christ bids men direct their thoughts and energies is "meat which endureth"—abideth would be better: it is one of the characteristic words of this Gospel. When our Lord says, "Labor... for that meat (satisfying portion) which endureth unto everlasting life," He was not inculcating salvation by works. This is very clear from His next words—"which the Son of man shall give unto you." But He was affirming that which needs to be pressed on the half-hearted and those who are occupied with material things. It is difficult to preserve the balance of truth. On the one hand, we are so anxious to insist that salvation is by grace alone, that we are in danger of failing to uphold the sinner's responsibility to seek the Lord with all his heart. Again; in pressing the total depravity of the natural man, his deadness in trespasses and sins, we are apt to neglect our duty of calling on him to repent and believe

the Gospel. This word of Christ's, "Labor . . . for the meat which endureth" is parallel (in substance) with "Strive to enter in at the strait gate" (Luke 13:24), and "every one presseth into the kingdom of God" (Luke 16:16). "For him hath God the Father sealed" (John 6:27). What is meant by Christ being "sealed" by God the Father? First, notice it is as "Son of man" that He is here said to be "sealed." That is, it was as the Son of God, but incarnate. There are two prime thoughts connected with "sealing:" identification, and attestation or ratification. In Revelation 7 we read of God's angel "sealing" twelve thousand from each of the tribes of Israel. The sealing there consists of placing a mark on their foreheads, and it is for the purpose of identification: to distinguish and separate them from the mass of apostate Israel. Again, in Esther 8:8 we read, "Write ye also for the Jews, as it liketh you, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's ring: for the writing which is written in the king's name, and sealed with the king's ring, may no man reverse." Here the thought is entirely different. The king's "seal" there speaks of authority. His seal was added for the purpose of confirmation and ratification. These, we doubt not, are the principle thoughts we are to associate with the "sealing" of Christ. The historical reference is to the time when Christ was baptized—Acts 10:38. When the Lord Jesus, in marvellous condescension, had identified Himself with the believing remnant in Israel, taking His place in that which spoke of death, the Father there singled Him out by "anointing" or "sealing" Him with the Holy Spirit. This was accompanied by His audible voice, saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Thus was the Christ, now about to enter upon His mediatorial work, publicly identified and accredited by God. The Father testified to the perfections of His incarnate Son, and communicated official authority, by "sealing" Him with the Holy Spirit. This declaration of Christ here in verse 27 anticipated the question or challenge which we find in verse 52, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" The sufficient answer, already given, was "for him hath God the Father sealed." So, too, it anticipated and answered the question of verse 30: "What sign showest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee?" Just as princes of the realm are often authorized by the king to act in governmental and diplomatic affairs on his behalf, and carry credentials that bear the king's seal to confirm their authority before those to whom they are sent, so Christ gave proof of His heavenly authority by His miracles: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power" (Acts 10:38). It is blessed to know that we, too, have been "sealed": Ephesians 1:13. Believers are "sealed" as those who are approved of God. But observe, carefully, that it is in Christ we are thus distinguished. "In whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise." Christ was "sealed" because of His own intrinsic perfections; we, because of our identification and union with Him! "Accepted in the beloved" (Eph. 1:6) gives us the same thought. Mark, though, it is not said (as commonly misunderstood) that the Holy Spirit seals us, but that the Holy Spirit Himself is God's "Seal" upon us—the distinguishing sign of identification, for sinners do not have the Holy Spirit (Jude 19). Let the student ponder the following questions, preparatory to our next chapter:— 1. What does the question in verse 28 intimate? 2. What is the meaning of verse 29? 3. What do verses 30 and 31 demonstrate in connection with those people? 4. In how many different respects is "bread" a suited emblem of Christ? 5. What is the meaning of verse 35—Does a believer ever "hunger" or "thirst"? 6. Who have been given to Christ by the Father? verse 37. 7. What comforting truth is found in verse 39?

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