

The Helpless One and the Helper

by Horatius Bonar

The sermon emphasizes the importance of faith in Jesus amidst fear and uncertainty, illustrating His readiness to help and deliver us.

Scripture: Matthew 14:24

Topics: "Faith in Trials", "Jesus as Our Helper"

Description

Horatius Bonar emphasizes the contrast between the helplessness of Peter and the unwavering support of Jesus during a stormy night on the sea. The sermon illustrates how faith is often tested by fear and doubt, as seen when Peter begins to sink after initially walking on water towards Jesus. Bonar highlights the importance of recognizing Jesus' presence and power, which brings comfort and courage amidst life's storms. Ultimately, the message conveys that even in moments of weakness, Jesus is ready to save and support those who call upon Him.

Transcript

"But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary. And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear. But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer: it is I; be not afraid. And Peter answered him and 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. But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and, beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me. And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?--Matthew 14:24-31.

Faith's home is in the future; so is her heritage. At present she has nothing but God himself to live upon,--to feed upon; all else is within the veil. It will come in due season; but meanwhile the only real thing is God. Him she knows, she trusts, she walks with, she converses with. But from the visible she is disengaged, and dwells in the invisible,--present and future. "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Thus we live by faith.

Yet though thus living by faith, in another atmosphere, and above the level of things seen, we cannot help being affected by matter, and time, and motion, and change, and pain, and death, and fear, and hunger, and thirst, and the various conditions of the body. Sometimes there is brightness, sometimes there is

dimness; sometimes we are lifted up and expanded, sometimes we are depressed and straitened. We are too like a revolving beacon-light, with its alternate flash and gloom. Sometimes a word of Scripture warms and brightens wonderfully; sometimes it seems cold and dark. Sometimes we are brave and fervent, ready to confront any danger or trial, because of the peace within; sometimes we turn pale, and shrink from sorrow or peril; so variable is our pulse; so uncertain our spirits; so feeble our spiritual health; so sickly our spiritual frame.

It was night upon a stormy sea. The boat was but a fisherman's, unfit to weather wind and wave. The night-blast was right against them. They toiled, but made little progress.

The night wears on. Watch after watch passes by. It is now the fourth; the last, just before the dawn; still dark. In the darkness, a form is dimly seen, the outline of a human figure in the gloom. What is it? Who is it? Is it from beneath or from above? Is it material or spiritual? The disciples are in terror; Peter, no doubt, among the rest.

But it is not with the disciples that the narrative has chiefly to do; it is with Peter,--or rather with Peter and the Lord. These two stand out before us here, inviting our attention. Or we might say, we have first the disciples and the storm; then the disciples are lost sight of, and we see only Peter and the Lord; then Peter disappears, and we behold no one "save Jesus only."

I. Christ's words of cheer. He saw their terror, and He knew its cause. The storm and the darkness had alarmed them; but more than these, the figure in the distance. It might be a spirit from beneath let loose upon them; it might be the prince of the power of the air,--the ruler of the world's darkness,--coming to increase their danger, to accomplish their destruction. Christ corrects their thoughts, and in so doing removes their fears. His words of cheer are brief, but full of power. In our translation they are ten; in the original only five. "Be of good cheer: it is I; be not afraid." The first of these clauses is but one word, and it is the keynote of the passage. "Be of good cheer," or simply, "Courage"! "Be not cast down or troubled." Right through the darkness, and over the storm, came this cheering word. But it was not the mere word that thus sounded, it was the well-known voice, the tones of which they would at once recognize. And then it was followed up with the "It is I";--which is again followed up with "be not afraid,"--"dismiss all your fears." The special cheer of these words was, however, the "It is I," and without this all the rest would have been vain. It is the announcement of his presence that was the specially cheering thing; it would have been enough even had he not (in his love and anxiety to relieve their fears) added, "Be of good cheer: be not afraid." What was the storm to Him? What was it to them, if He were with them? What were night, and storm, and darkness, with all their perils, if He were there? They needed no more to comfort them than "It is I." It told them of power and love more than sufficient to meet all danger, and to deliver from all evil.

II. Peter's response. "If it be thou, bid me come to thee on the water." The other disciples were silent. Their fears were quieted, and that sufficed. But Peter must have more. He must have the Master with him; nay, he must run to meet Him, even on the water. There does not seem to be any use in Peter's going to meet his Master. The request was prompted simply by affection, and a desire to be where He was. It looks very like one of Peter's hasty utterances,--"It is good to be here;" "Shall we smite with the sword?" But still it is faith that is working. The desire to go was, no doubt, affection, but the feeling which overlooked all the difficulties of the way,--the impossibility of walking on the water,--was faith. So boundless was his confidence in his Master's power and love. A word, he knew, would be enough! Oh for Peter's faith in Jesus;--even in little things; things which seem to have no large object in view, but merely the exhibition of affection towards him! Here is faith that could remove mountains! Faith that can do miracles,--that makes

light of impossibilities! Peter saw Jesus only; darkness and storm were nothing! There might be the desire to get out of this sinking vessel, which had for hours been buffeting with the wind; and the feeling that with Jesus he was safer on the bare water than in the ship without Him. In Peter's estimation, security was only at the side of Jesus! Anywhere, anywhere with Him; in the fiery furnace, or in the raging sea. Is this our estimate of Jesus, and of all things, or places, or perils in connection with Him? Safety with Him; but nowhere else, even in the stateliest vessel or the strongest fort.

The form of Peter's request is remarkable, "bid," or "command" me to come to thee on the water; not "permit." In a case like this, mere permission would not do. Had it been the highway or the mountainside, permission would have been enough. But it was the sea. To venture there, he must have a command; and in obeying that command, he could count upon omnipotence being placed at his disposal. Jesus commands; shall not all the elements and powers of nature unite in ministering to the fulfillment of the command?

There is here, also, the contrast between the Peter of yesterday and the Peter of today; fitfulness both in faith and feeling. One day it is "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord;" another it is "Lord, bid me come to thee." One day he forsakes his Master; another he casts himself into the sea to get at Him, as he stood on the shore. Yet fitful as these were, impulsive as Peter was, all his fitfulness and impulsiveness centered in Jesus. The many currents of his wayward being,--sometimes rushing right forward, sometimes going backward, sometimes eddying round,--yet all took their motion from Jesus, and their direction from something connected with Him. It might be difficult, at times, to analyze or understand Peter's feelings; but various as they were in their upper or their underflow, this was still uppermost, "Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee."

III. Christ's response to Peter. "Come"! One word; no more. It was all that Peter wanted; and he got it. The request was a bold and a great one; but it was granted at once. It was a request made without any previous promise or warrant; yet there was no reluctance nor delay. Peter knew to whom he was speaking. He had seen Him do miracles for others,--strangers,--why not for himself, a disciple?[2] Thus he casts himself upon the Master, and the Master at once responded. He honoured his disciple's confidence. How comfortably must that word "come" have sounded in the midst of the darkness! It was so gracious; and it was so exact an answer; an answer to an apparently useless request. The requests for healing and the like were all for some needful purpose; and we the less wonder at the Master's grace in granting them. But this seems so useless,--the mere utterance of warm impulse,--that we are struck with the marvelous grace of the Master, who, instead of keeping silence, or rebuking his hasty disciple, grants his request for a miracle,--a stupendous miracle,--and bids him "come." This is singular condescension, and fitted in many ways to rebuke as well as remove our unworthy suspicions of the Lord. He who so graciously responded to his disciple's request for a needless miracle, will not deny us when petitioning for what is needful. With what power should the promise come to us, "Ask, and ye shall receive"; and what an illustration is this of the text, "This is the confidence that we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he heareth us."

IV. Peter's venture. He came down out of the ship, and walked on the water. I call it venture; and yet it was not venture, for that implies hazard, whereas here there was no risk. It was rather leaving a leaking, sinking boat to go on board a noble ship. Still to human eyes, though not to angels', it was a venture. Frail as the vessel was, it was to human eyes safer than the sea. Out of this vessel he lets himself down into that raging sea, and began his walk. He was now wholly in the arms of Jesus; nothing between him and the waves but these everlasting arms. What his feelings were in letting go his hold of the ship we do not

know; perhaps very peculiar; but with that word "come" sounding over the waves, why should he fear? His was the venture of faith; a faith which shewed itself, not in its power to grasp but to let go the vessel's side,--the human stay. Yes, we often speak of faith as taking hold; but here it is seen in letting go.

And is not this oftentimes the very point of the difficulty we experience in believing? We cling to the visible, the palpable prop,--the human rope which we hold in our hand,--unwilling to let go. We speak of our inability to believe; but what is this save our tenacity in holding on to the very things which God asks us to quit? We say that we "cannot lay hold"; should we not rather say that we "cannot let go"? We complain that we have no power to cling and grasp; whereas it should be that we have no will to let go. How much power is needed to let go a rope or to drop into the sea? Never let us forget the thought of Peter quitting the vessel and dropping into the sea; but let us treasure it as one of the best exhibitions of true faith. How many, though they hear the Master's voice saying, "Come," linger in the vessel, cling to it, look over its sides, as if resolved to drop down, and then shrink back into it, afraid to venture from the visible into the invisible, from that which sense and touch can feel, to that which we know nothing of save by the bare word of God.

V. Peter's failure. He had bravely dropped into the sea, and was walking along; but he soon began to be alarmed. The wind did not lull; it blew as violently as ever. His fears awoke, and his faith shook. He began to sink; and in his terror cried out, "Lord, save me." The visible and sensible had reassumed their power; and under their evil influence, faith gave way; the things unseen vanished; the power and presence of Christ seemed now as nothing when compared with the power and presence of the storm. Peter was, in fact, trying to resume his hold of the things he had let go; he was clutching or groping after the visible. Thus unbelief was regaining its power. His eye at first saw nothing but Jesus, now it sees the raging billows. His ear at first heard nothing but the Master's "Come"; now it hears the roar of the blast. It was thus that the evil heart of unbelief was re-displaying itself; the storm was coming between him and Christ; terror came in, and he began to sink. Jesus was for the moment lost sight of, and Peter was in despair. The Master had granted his request; had bid him come; and now he knew not what to do; perhaps he repented his petition, and wished he had never left the vessel. But thus Jesus shews His disciple his weakness, and takes this opportunity for magnifying his own power. What is Peter now, and where, if Jesus do not help? He is like a withered olive-leaf tossed upon the foam. Without Jesus he sinks, he perishes. But though faith has given way, Jesus still remains; and even in spite of unbelief he succors and saves.

VI. Christ's deliverance and rebuke. It is not, like man, first rebuke and then deliverance; but first deliverance and then rebuke. How like Him who came, in love, to bless the unlovable, to save the lost, to bring nigh those that were afar off! How like the good Shepherd, bent only on laying hold of his strayed one! How like Him who spoke the parable of the prodigal son, and who in it has shewn us how God receives back the very worst of his lost ones, without upbraiding, or coldness, or delay!

(1.) Jesus stretched forth his hand immediately. Instantaneous deliverance! He would not have the fears of his disciple last a moment. He succors at once. In that outstretched hand the marks of the nails were not yet to be seen. These were still to come. But the love was there; the power was there; the security was there. In our day we have the same outstretched hand; only the prints of the nails, the marks of love are now there. The outstretched and the pierced hand are one! To his sinking Peters he stretches the pierced hand. To each sinking, perishing son of Adam, he does the same. Take hold, O man, take hold!

(2.) Jesus caught him. Nothing is said of Peter's laying hold of Jesus; it is Jesus laying hold of Peter that we have here. Jesus caught him; whether by the hand or not, we are not told; nor does it matter. "Jesus caught him," that is enough. How, like this to the apostle's words, "apprehended of Christ"! What now are winds and waves? What matters it whether the boat is at hand or not? Rage on ye winds! Rise up ye waters! Darken the heavens ye clouds! Jesus has caught him,--Jesus holds him, is not that sufficient? O man, sinking in the world's stormy sea, let Jesus lay hold of you, as he is most willing to do, and all is well! For what is all salvation but Jesus seizing hold of the sinner! "He sent from above, he took me, he drew me out of many waters."

(3.) Jesus spoke to him. Hitherto he had heard but his own voice, "Lord save me"; now he hears the Master's voice responding. His own cry could not allay his fears; but the words of Jesus do this at once. His first word is rebuke (for it is but one word in the Greek), "O thou of little faith"; or as it should simply be, "O little-faith!" This is all. He does not dwell on this, nor continue his upbraiding. What gentleness and tenderness are here! O little-faith! Might he not say to us, "O no-faith"? And then he adds, "Wherefore didst thou doubt?" or, "For what purpose dost thou doubt?" "What is the use of thy doubting?" Perhaps the words involve such questions as these: (1.) Whence comes this doubting? (2.) What means this doubting? (3.) Of what service will this doubting be?

Thus speaks Jesus still, "It is I, be not afraid." By his tones and words, no less than by his gestures (his stretching out of the hand), he cheers us, he beckons us, he comforts us. Wherefore then do we doubt? What reason have we for so doing? Why not fling all distrust away?

Such is the attitude of Jesus to his church in her darkest and stormiest nights. He comes to her on the water. He places himself near. He waits to succor. O church of God, accept the proffered hand, and listen to the gracious voice.

Such is his attitude towards our world. "All the day long (and all the night long too) have I stretched out my hands." Yes; he stretches out his hands. O sinking world dost thou not heed his hands and his voice? Dost thou not welcome his interposition? Or wilt thou reject Him utterly?

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