

Matthew 14:1-36 | “When Things Look Bleak”
Preached on October 15, 2023 by Pastor Matt Brown

Please turn in your Bibles to Matthew 14, and we will be covering the whole chapter today.
[pause]

In the previous chapter, Jesus gave a bunch of kingdom parables and was rejected at his hometown.

Now we are told more about Jesus’ ministry in chapter 14.

So let’s begin by **READING** the passage. *[READ]*

There’s a made up illustration of “two frogs [who] fell into a tub of cream. *[pause]*

One looked at the high sides of the tub which were too difficult to crawl over and said, ‘It is hopeless.’

So he resigned himself to death, relaxed, and sank to the bottom. *[pause]*

The other one determined to keep swimming as long as he could.

‘Something might happen,’ he said.

He kept kicking and churning, and finally he found himself on a solid platform of butter and jumped to safety.”¹ *[pauseeee]*

We all respond differently to bleak situations.

Maybe it’s a situation where you barely have any money to pay for something.

Or maybe it’s a time when your health is deteriorating quickly and there seems to be nothing that will help to make it better.

Or maybe it’s some situation with another person, and any sort of resolution to it seems impossible. *[pauseeeee]*

How do *you* respond to situations that look dire? *[pause]*

Some give up as they lose all hope of anything good coming out of the situation, kind of like that first frog. *[pause]*

Others just sulk in despair and discouragement because their circumstance is just so overwhelming in their minds.

“What good could come out of this?” They think. *[pause]*

¹ Robert Morgan, *Nelson’s Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*. Found at: <https://ministry127.com/resources/illustrations/trials?page=1>.

Maybe for you, you become frozen and idle.

You sort of hit that wall where you are so baffled as to what to do that you don't really do anything. *[pause]*

Or more likely you become absolutely filled with worry and anxiety, and fret over the situation nonstop. *[pauseeee]*

Which of those responses most characterizes you?

Is there another one that you do which wasn't mentioned, but still isn't the best response? *[pauseeee]*

Here in Matthew 14, we see some initially bleak stories.

John the Baptist is killed, there's no food for 5,000 plus people in a remote region, and the disciples face a fierce storm at sea.

But what will God teach us today through these bleak circumstances? *[pause]*

The first thing is this...

I. Following Jesus won't be easy.

Years ago, the company called Staples had this commercial with an 'easy button' in it. *[pause]*

It was this red button that had the word 'easy' on it.

And the person in the commercial would push this easy button hoping that it would make their situation easy. *[pauseeee]*

Don't you often wish that you had an easy button for life?

We all do, but the truth is that life doesn't work that way. *[pause]*

What's interesting though is that sometimes people think that following Christ is like pushing an easy button for their life.

They think that once they have chosen to follow Him, only good times will roll.

But that's not true, for Scripture consistently teaches us that following Christ means sometimes inviting *more* difficulty into our lives because of persecution. *[pauseeee]*

Consider what John the Baptist went through.

In verses 1-12, we are told that Herod hears of Jesus' fame, but mistakenly thinks that He is John the Baptist resurrected. *[pause]*

You see, it seems as though Herod feels haunted by John, for Herod is the one who put him to death.

And through a series of events, Herod felt compelled through fear to deliver the head of John the Baptist to the daughter of Herodias.

This all happened because John the Baptist stood up for what's right and called out Herod for marrying his brother's wife. *[pauseee]*

Did following the Lord make John's life easier?

He was thrown in jail and then died for the Lord's sake. *[pause]*

Following the Lord actually put a target on his back, and this is true for us, too...

Sometimes following Christ will actually put a target on your back. *[pause]*

It's our connection to Christ that makes us an enemy to wicked men.

They don't like their sins being exposed for what it is, and their guilty consciences will try to quiet you by any means necessary.

Yet we follow Christ no matter what.

Like John, we stand for what's right, and leave the rest up to the Lord. *[pauseeeee]*

Following Jesus isn't easy for it sometimes puts a target on our backs, but following Jesus also isn't easy because sometimes it takes us to desolate places. *[pauseeee]*

In the feeding of the 5,000 story, these people had all followed Jesus there. *[pause]*

It's not like they deserted Christ and ended up in a deserted place.

No, the disciples and the people followed Christ to a remote place with no food. *[pauseeee]*

Some people may think, "What's with that? I thought following Jesus meant abundant provisions at all times, 24/7?"

Some people may think, "I thought that following Jesus meant I will be prosperous and just rolling in the money?"

But here we see that following Jesus led to a place of meager resources. *[pauseeee]*

Let me tell you, if you follow Christ faithfully, it won't always be easy because it will sometimes lead to a desolate place.

The money might start feeling a little tight, even though you are faithfully following Christ, or even *because* you are faithfully and generously giving. *[pause]*

You will feel like you are in a desolate place, as your resources become extremely slim.

You may even get to a place where you say, “Lord, I only have this much, but what good is this for such a big task?”² *[pause]*

You will definitely follow Christ and get to a desolate place of bleak personal strength and competence.

You will feel stretched, strained, weak, and incapable. *[pauseeee]*

The disciples felt that as they thought about how to feed this massive crowd of people, and having no idea how to do so. *[pauseeee]*

This just reminds us that following Jesus isn’t easy, for sometimes following Him takes us to desolate places, where our resources seem way too small. *[pauseeee]*

Thirdly, following Christ will sometimes lead us through some frightful situations. *[pause]*

In the story of Jesus walking on water, the disciples were actually *sent* by Jesus out into the boat that faced a storm. *[pause]*

It’s not like they did anything wrong, which led them to the scary storm, but they were following Jesus’ orders. *[pause]*

This is a good reminder that following Jesus doesn’t preclude us from facing some frightful events. *[pause]*

I’m sure each of us could recount many times where we have gone through some intense moments in life.

And these moments I’m talking about aren’t the ones that we brought needlessly upon ourselves, but the ones that just happen to us. *[pause]*

Maybe it was that cancer diagnosis, or the news that you were going to get laid off at work, or just the craziness of the world around you.

Those are some times where it feels like you are going through a storm, and following Jesus didn’t spare you from it. *[pause]*

Christians face the same diseases, droughts, and disasters as unbelievers do. *[pauseeee]*

Following Jesus isn’t easy.

Sometimes it will mean having a target on our back for following Him, like John the Baptist.

² An allusion to what Andrew says in the parallel account in John 6:9.

Sometimes it will mean following Him to a place where our resources are stretched thin, like the remote place they went to.

Or sometimes it will mean going through an intense storm of life, like the disciples faced out at sea. *[pauseeee]*

So do not be deceived by people who claim that following Jesus will mean no trials or tribulations or hard times.

For even Christ said, “In the world you will have tribulation.”³ *[pauseeee]*

Now if I just stopped there, that would be some bad news, right?

If I just stopped there, I would only be giving you part of the truth, and it would lead our hearts nowhere good. *[pause]*

We could think, “Well it’s hopeless then,” or, “Why follow Him if following Him makes my life hard, and that’s it?”

Or even, we could start to try to depend on ourselves, our own resources, or our own strength.

But if you notice, I’ve only talked about the first parts of the stories here. *[pause]*

The stories don’t end with the mass crowds of people starving in the remote place, or the disciples being shipwrecked at sea.

Instead, the stories end with Jesus stepping up and providing relief, and through that dramatic turn of events, we learn that...

II. Following Jesus will take trusting in Jesus.

I want you to think about this: what leads us to trust someone?

Because we don’t just automatically trust every single person to do anything and everything. *[pause]*

You don’t trust your toddler to make you dinner.

You don’t trust a random person off the street to cut your hair. *[pause]*

So there’s certain things that lead us to trust someone to do something.

And I would suggest that we trust people based on who they are and what they have done. *[pause]*

³ John 16:33.

If someone is a barber or chef, we trust them to cut our hair or cook our food based on who they are.

Or you trust your friend based on who they are because you know their character.

Maybe for someone else, you have seen them come through in the past, so you are trusting that they will come through again. *[pauseeee]*

We often trust people based on who they are and what they have done, and in these stories, Jesus will lead us to trust Him more by showing us both of those things...

He will show off who He is, and what He can do. *[pauseeee]*

In the stories found in this chapter, people had needs, didn't they?

The crowds needed food, the disciples needed rescuing from the storm, and the sick needed healed. *[pauseeee]*

As people living in a fallen world, we are inherently needy.

We get sick and need healing in order to be healthy again.

We encounter things out of our control like extreme weather, which we need protection from.

And our bodies need food in order to survive. *[pause]*

We are dependent, needy people, and in many cases, we try to provide for ourselves, but what happens when you *can't* provide for your needs?

What happens when your health condition baffles the doctors?

What happens when a storm of life hits that's out of your control, and there's nothing you can do to stop it?

What happens when that bill comes and your resources are way too small to cover it?

You are pushed to the end of yourself, and you realize, "I cannot do this. I can't solve this. I can't provide. I can't resolve it on my own."

THAT'S the place the disciples and the people in these stories found themselves in, and THAT'S the place that Christ shows His power most clearly in our lives. *[pause]*

We are needy people, yet we have a need-providing Lord. *[pauseeee]*

The amazing thing is that He isn't a begrudging, annoyed need-Provider, no, He is a compassionate need-Provider. *[pause]*

Imagine you are desperately in need of some food for you are starving, and you go to someone who has 2 apples.

They see your need, and you plead with them for just a couple bites of their second apple.
[pause]

How would it feel if that person was like, “Ugh. I guess you can have my second apple. Don’t ask for anything else ever again though. Ugh, this is annoying.” [pause]

They provided for your need, but it wasn’t pleasant, for they did it annoyed and reluctantly.
[pause]

So many times we view Christ that way.

We go to Him sometimes with our needs, but we think, “He’s probably annoyed with me, for this is the third time this week that I’ve gone to Him for something.”

Or we think that He will reluctantly give us our needs like that man, where He’s like, “OK, I guess you can have it this time.” [pauseeee]

Dear fellow brother or sister in Christ, Jesus isn’t like that.

He is a compassionate need-Supplier!

Just look at these stories and marvel at His compassion! [pauseeee]

After Jesus hears about what went down with Herod and John the Baptist, He withdraws by Himself to a desolate place.

And actually, in parallel gospel accounts, we find that He takes His disciples with Him to get away and rest.⁴

So here is Jesus seeking to be alone with His disciples, yet when they make it ashore, a great crowd meets them. [pause]

Most of us would be like, “This crowd won’t let me be! Come on! I just wanted some time away from these people!”

Yet Jesus has compassion on them and heals their sick. [pause]

Talk about selflessness!

Instead of being focused on what He wanted, He was focused on what they needed, as He put others’ needs first. [pauseee]

This is the opposite of our “self-care” obsessed culture.

⁴ See Mark 6:30-32 and Luke 9:10.

Now there is certainly a place for making sure to take time to rest yourself, yet I believe our culture has taken it too far.

Our culture is obsessed with messages like, “Take time for you! Don’t let others sap your energy!”

But aren’t you thankful that Christ isn’t like that?

He took time away, but He also sometimes sacrificed those times away like this story. *[pause]*

He sees this crowd and doesn’t disregard them in selfishness, but ministered to them in compassion. *[pause]*

This compassion is seen as he heals more people at the end of chapter 14, when sick people are brought to him from all over the region. *[pauseeee]*

The truth is that when Christ sees sufferers He can’t help but have compassion for them - that’s His compassionate heart! *[pause]*

Later, when the disciples want to send the crowds to find their own food, Jesus highlights that they should provide for their needs. *[pause]*

Talk about compassion!

He could have just thought, “This annoying crowd should just fend for themselves. It’s not My fault they decided to meet Me in this remote place.”

But once again, the compassion of Christ shines forth for needy people. *[pauseeee]*

What about the story of Jesus walking on the water?

Did you notice something in the beginning of that story? *[pause]*

Once again, the story starts with Jesus seeking alone time. *[pause]*

This time, according to verse 23, Jesus goes on a mountain to pray by Himself, yet what do we find?

He leaves that time to go help the disciples as they are being beaten by the winds and the waves. *[pause]*

Jesus’ heart beats with compassion for the needy!

In humility, love, and selflessness, He looked to the interests of others,⁵ even if it meant less “me time”. *[pause]*

⁵ See Philippians 2:4.

Like I said earlier, there is certainly a place for personal rest and things like that, but has our culture influenced us more than Christ?

Jesus shows us that we should sacrifice our time and let others sap our energy at times, for compassion for the needy demands it.

In both of these stories, Jesus was either going to go to a place of being alone or coming from a place being alone, and yet He stops to serve others. *[pauseeee]*

Dwell upon the compassion of Christ for needy people, for *you are one of them!*

Jesus isn't detached and unemotional towards you.

Jesus isn't annoyed and reluctant to care about your needs.

No way, for Jesus' heart is overflowing with compassion, that's who He is, He's a God who is compassionate and gracious.⁶ *[pause]*

Don't hesitate to bring your needs to Him!

Don't believe lies about Him, thinking that He won't care, but run to Him in your need and find a compassionate Savior and Lord! *[pauseeee]*

You can not only trust that Christ will be compassionate with your needs, but you can trust Him with those needs.

He's both compassionate to care and powerful to provide. *[pause]*

In the story of the feeding of the 5,000, the disciples bring up that they are in a desolate place and the day is over, so the crowds should be sent away to find their own food. *[pause]*

So there was a great need: food.

It's not like today where you could just hop in the car, drive down the street and stop by McDonalds for dinner.

They were in a remote place, and there were 5,000 men, so even more people if you add in the women and children. *[pause]*

How could you feed such a large crowd in that day when you were in a remote place?

But what does Jesus do?

He takes their little bit, the 5 loaves and 2 fish, and miraculously feeds them, even creating so much that there's 12 baskets full of leftovers. *[pauseeeee]*

⁶ See Exodus 34:6 ('merciful' can also be translated as 'compassionate').

You can trust Christ with your needs because He can provide for your needs!

He can take our little resources and do amazing things.

He can provide for your needs, even if it looks impossible.

Your empty pockets don't hinder His providing hand. *[pauseeee]*

What needs do you have?

Will you trust them with Christ?

Don't think, "But all I have is this little bit," but remember, "Christ can do a lot with just a little bit!"

If He could create that much food out of so little, just think of what He could do. *[pause]*

Now this is not to say that trusting Jesus will just make you this millionaire, but it's to say that He will take care of your *needs* so that you can be *satisfied*. *[pause]*

We trust His ways and His timing, and rest in the fact that He knows best. *[pauseeeee]*

We can also trust Him with our difficult situations, as we see with the story of Jesus walking on the water.

The disciples were overwhelmed and fearful as they encountered a storm out in the boat.

The waves were crashing all around and the wind was whipping fiercely.

They were at a loss as to what to do, what *could* they do?

Yet here comes Jesus walking on the water. *[pause]*

He's walking, not running in panic, not crawling in fear, but strolling along on top of the water amidst a storm.

And it's His fear-calming presence and words that make the difference as He says, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." *[pause]*

I just love that.

He starts out by calling them to take heart, or take courage.

They were to be confident and assured.

But how? How could they have courage in a time like this! *[pause]*

Maybe you think that way about your difficult, frightful situations.

How could I take courage when my health is so bad?

How could I take courage when there's so much to be fearful about?

How could I take courage when everything seems so out of control, chaotic, and I'm filled with fear?

The answer: Jesus' presence. *[pause]*

He says, "It is I."

He doesn't even say who "I" is because He is the great "I am",⁷ and by His voice, they should recognize their Master.

So they didn't need to fear because Christ was there. *[pauseeee]*

That same fear-reducing, calm-producing presence of Christ is with us! *[pause]*

Do you ever think, "I don't need to fear because Christ is here?"

He told us that He would never leave us, but that He would always be with us,⁸ and He is through the Spirit!

He tells us to "take heart", which is the same word He used when He said, "In the world you will have tribulation. But *take heart*; I have overcome the world."⁹ *[pauseeee]*

So what happens next?

Good ol' Peter asks to walk on the water, but started to sink because he got scared of the storm.

And the reason is because he turned his eyes off of Christ and onto His surroundings, and that's the same thing that can happen to us. *[pause]*

When we turn our attention on the fearfulness of our circumstances, we will sink into fear and doubt.

So to be buoyed up amid life's storms, we must keep our eyes on Christ. *[pause]*

He's not only the one who can keep us afloat, but He's the One who reaches out His hand and takes a hold of us when we simply cry out, "Lord, save me." *[pauseeee]*

Trust Christ in your difficult, frightful circumstances.

He is with you, and reassures you, "Do not be afraid." *[pause]*

⁷ A reference to Exodus 3:14.

⁸ A reference to Matthew 28:20.

⁹ John 16:33 (italics is mine).

His amazing presence and word calms our fears through the storm, and when He stills the storm, we can't help but worship and say, "Truly, you are the Son of God." *[pauseeee]*

Following Jesus isn't easy, but it's worth it because of who He is.

I know that life isn't easy following Jesus.

We will face persecution for His name, we will go through times of need, and some intense moments, but we trust Him, knowing *who* we trust. *[pause]*

For as God provided manna in the wilderness,¹⁰ so Christ provided bread in the wilderness, showing Himself to be the true Bread from Heaven.¹¹ *[pause]*

As God drove back the waters of the Red Sea by a strong wind, so Christ stills the strong winds of the sea.

He is the Son of God, who can be trusted with *everything*. *[pauseeee]*

Knowing who Christ is, and what He has done gives us such hope and peace in this life.

He is the compassionate Christ, whose heart is moved by the needy.

He is the all-powerful Lord, who can create a feast for thousands out of a meager little, and who can stroll along the waters of a storm and calm it at will. *[pause]*

So, whether you are like John the Baptist, in prison, facing death row for His name, you can trust Him.

Whether you are in a bleak place, faced with a glaring lack of resources, you can rely upon His ability to provide.

Or whether you are going through a storm in life, and the wind and waves seem overwhelming, you can take heart and not be afraid, for He is with you. *[pause]*

He can be trusted no matter what you are going through. *[pauseeeee]*

What are you going through right now that is not easy?

Is it a bleak situation? Are your needs great?

Is your strength, competence, and ability to resolve something showing itself lacking?

Are you going through something that certainly feels like a storm? It's daunting and frightful.

Remember who Christ is, and what He has done in these stories, and depend on Him.

¹⁰ See Exodus 16.

¹¹ See John 6:32-35.

He is truly the Son of God, who you can trust. *[pause]*

And to think that this great food-creating, water-walking, storm-stilling Lord went so far as to die for us on the Cross is astounding.

To think that He took our place in great love and compassion boggles our mind, and stirs our affections. *[pause]*

He took the punishment that we deserved because of our sin, so that we could be made right with God and have a home in Heaven.

And in power, He was raised from the grave, assuring us our blessed hope.

When we trust in Him and what He did for us, we are saved. *[pause]*

Like the disciples in these stories, we only bring our need and look to Him, but He brings the rescue and He brings the feast. *[pauseeee]*

So once again let me ask you: how do *you* respond to situations that look bleak?

May we all remember who Christ is, and look to Him in those moments.

He is the Savior who died for us, the King who rose from the dead, the Provider who fed the 5,000, the Healer who in compassion heals the sick, and the Lord who walked on water and stilled the storm.

Will you trust Him?