

Message #21

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John

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## THE SEARCH FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS

JOHN 6:15-21

I.

In 1985 Robert Funk, the chairman of the graduate department of religion at Vanderbilt University, organized a group of fifty Biblical scholars and 100 influential laymen to form the Jesus Seminar. Their goal was to determine the historicity of the deeds and sayings of Jesus. This group was part of a larger movement of scholars who were trying to get an accurate picture of the real Jesus who lived here 2000 + years ago. This quest has been dubbed "the search for the historical Jesus." None of these people accept the notion that the Bible was inspired by God or without error in what it contains.

The scholars in the Jesus Seminar had a series of meetings in which they first took the most famous sayings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels and voted on their historicity. They used colored beads to place their votes. Red beads were used to indicate that Jesus really did make this statement. Pink beads were used to indicate that Jesus probably said something like this. Gray beads were used to indicate that Jesus did not really say it, but that the statement reflected the general thinking of Jesus. Black beads were used to indicate that the saying was not made by Jesus and that His followers later made it up. They followed a similar procedure in addressing the most famous deeds of Jesus. The end result of their work was what they called the Scholars' Gospel.

The underlying premise of these scholars was that Jesus was just a man and that supernatural events are not possible. We encountered a similar situation a couple of weeks ago when I pointed out that evolutionary scientists also start with the premise that the supernatural is impossible and that everything must have a material and physical explanation. The difficulty with evolution is that scientific discoveries are undermining the naturalistic explanation. The difficulty with the search for the historical Jesus is that the supernatural is excluded right from the beginning, and there is no objective basis for conclusions that the supposed scholars reach.

Jesus is the most fascinating figure in human history. He made extraordinary claims. He has left historical evidence about His life and teaching that is worth searching out. But the best place to begin is

with the testimony of eyewitnesses who knew Him and observed His deeds and listened to His words. Such is the case with the Apostle John and the Gospel that he left for us.

We have seen that John organized His biography of Jesus around seven sign miracles which he intended to point to the conclusion that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God. Last week we looked at the fourth miracle, which involved the feeding of the 5000 men, along with additional women and children. Today we will look at the effects of that miracle and the miracle that immediately follows. We will consider what this tells us about the historical Jesus and how it should impact our lives.

II.

So in v. 15 of John #6, which is p. 891 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs, we will find first that THE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS NEED TO RECOGNIZE THAT JESUS DID NOT COME TO ESTABLISH A POLITICAL KINGDOM. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS NEED TO...) We saw last week that Jesus was a year into His public ministry when He performed this miracle in the region of Galilee. It was just before the time of the Passover feast.

(GALILEE JUDEA MAP) After the death of Herod the Great, the governance of Galilee was given by the Romans to Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the Great. Capernaum had become the base of operations for Jesus and His disciples. Jesus had sent the twelve apostles out in pairs with the authority to perform miracles. So after their return, Jesus went away with them to the northeast side of the Sea of Galilee, which was actually territory controlled by Herod Philip, another son of Herod the Great. They were in need of rest and relaxation.

(CANA CAPERNAUM MAP) This northeastern coast of the Sea of Galilee was a less populated area. But the Galileans followed Jesus and His crew. So Jesus spent part of a day teaching them. They were physically hungry after that. So Jesus performed the miracle of multiplying bread and fish to feed all of them. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The people recognized that there were similarities in what they were seeing with what Moses did in the Sinai wilderness after he led them out of Egypt. Both events happened at the time of the Passover. Both situations involved a wilderness. There were two seas involved in the events. The Israelites were without food in both circumstances. Then bread was miraculously provided. God provided manna through the human leadership of Moses. Now Jesus had provided bread and fish for 15-20,000 people from Galilee.

We left off last week with v. 14 of #6: **“When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, ‘This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!’”** The connection that the people were making here was with the prophecy of Moses (PROJECTOR ON--- DEUTERONOMY 18:15) recorded in Deuteronomy #18 v. 15: **“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers--- it is to him you shall listen...”**

So these Galileans concluded: This is our guy. This is the prophet like Moses. Moses provided our ancestors not only with bread from heaven. He also led them out of slavery in Egypt. We are under the control of the Romans. Herod Antipas is a puppet of this pagan empire. Our high taxes go to the Gentiles. This Jesus is the guy who can liberate us from the Romans and reestablish a Jewish kingdom. He is the key to prosperity and freedom and success. He can make Israel great again. (PROJECTOR OFF)

According to v. 15 back in our passage, they encounter a major disappointment: **“Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”** The Galileans did not understand the real Jesus. He had not come to establish a political kingdom. Even the twelve apostles did not get it yet. They were all hoping that Jesus was going to set up an earthly kingdom and kick out the Romans.

The real Jesus had come into the world to do the job of a priest. Back in #1 John the Baptist had declared to His followers about Jesus: **“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”** Before Jesus could serve as an earthly king, He had to serve as a priest for all of humanity. He had to become the sacrifice. First comes the cross; then comes the crown. Later Jesus would tell the Roman governor Pontius Pilate that His kingdom was not of this world. One of the temptations that Satan had earlier presented to Jesus was the prospect of being given all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would just fall down and worship him.

Mark’s Gospel provides us a little more information about the story in v. 15 of our passage. (PROJECTOR ON--- MARK 6:45) In Mark #6 vv. 45 and 46, we are told, **“Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. (MARK 6:46) And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray.”**

The additional details that we learn here are that Jesus sent the disciples back across the lake in the boat after the miracle and after they had collected the leftover fish and bread. It is early in the evening. Jesus also dismisses the crowd of Galileans, who apparently head back to the other side of the lake by walking along the coast. Then Jesus withdraws to the mountain by Himself to pray.

Mark says that the disciples headed toward Bethsaida. John says that they headed toward Capernaum. There are various ways of resolving that apparent conflict. "Bethsaida" means house of fish." There were fishing villages all along this northern coast. It could be that Bethsaida was a part of Capernaum. It could be that there was a part of the town of Bethsaida in Herod Philip's realm that was along the coast just west of the Jordan River.

I suspect that the twelve disciples were disappointed as they headed back across the lake that evening. They were hoping that Jesus would establish His messianic kingdom soon. They saw that the people were ready to make Him king. Yet Jesus turned down the opportunity to take advantage of the popular support.

Instead Jesus went off by Himself to pray. Interesting, and perhaps instructive, that even the Son of God needed to have time alone to commune with His Heavenly Father. What do you suppose that He was praying about? Perhaps He was praying that the Galileans would have a better understanding of His mission. No doubt He was praying for His disciples and their understanding. I suspect that He was also praying for their perseverance in the trial that was going to confront them that very night. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Down through history the church has often failed to grasp this point that the mission of Jesus in His first coming was not to establish a political kingdom. By the 1500s the church in Europe had become closely intertwined with civil government in Europe. For many years it was the pope who crowned the leader of the Holy Roman Empire. The first of these emperors was Charlemagne, who saw himself as promoting one God, one emperor, one pope, and one city of God.

Martin Luther came along in the 1500s and spoke out against the corruption and wrong theology of the Catholic Church. He promoted religious freedom and salvation by grace through faith alone and religious authority that was rooted in the Scriptures alone. He saw the mission of the true church as not to develop political control but rather to promote the gospel and to change the lives of people.

There were German peasants in some parts of the German realm that came under some of the influence of Luther's teaching. They objected to the control that the church and some of the political leaders had over their lives. So they made a move to gain political control. Luther spoke out against them and argued from passages like Romans 13 that Christians were to be subject to the governing authorities and

were not to try to overthrow them. But some of these German peasants organized what became known as the Peasants' Revolt. They killed a German count and destroyed seventy monasteries. Eventually the German nobles got organized and did in these peasants. An estimated 80,000 of them were killed.

In the last century a movement arose called Liberation Theology, which had considerable influence in Latin America. A number of priests were involved in this movement. Their goal was to overthrow dictatorships and capitalist systems that repressed the common people. They wanted to establish political kingdoms that reflected the values of Jesus as they understood them. They looked at Jesus and Moses as rebels who provided models for overthrowing unjust social and economic structures. But Jesus did not come to establish a political kingdom.

In more recent times, and in our own country, some on the political right have sought to establish a political kingdom that reflects Biblical values. There is a theological movement known as Dominion Theology, or Reconstructionism, that promotes this. It has an eschatological aspect that involves postmillennialism. The idea here is that God is seeking to establish His kingdom upon the earth in the here and now. Things are gradually going to get better such that governments are established that reflect Biblical values. Only when this wonderful time arrives will Christ return to earth. This will be after the millennium has been established.

So adherents to Reconstructionism in our country argue that we should seek to make American government adopt the laws recorded in the Bible. (PROJECTOR ON--- PAT ROBERTSON) Pat Robertson, and some backers of the Moral Majority in the 1980s, seemed to promote these views. On one episode of the 700 Club (1/11/1985) Pat Robertson declared, "**Individual Christians---and Jewish people--- are the only ones that are qualified to have the reign, because hopefully, they will be governed by God and submitted to him.**" (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jesus will establish a political kingdom upon this earth, but only at His Second Coming. Christians in the meantime should promote Christian values and defend the rights of the unborn and promote the institution of the family and fight injustice and be involved in government. But the mission of the church of Christ is not to establish a political kingdom. Jesus Christ will do that at His Second Coming.

III.

In vv. 16-21 we find that THE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS NEED TO RECOGNIZE THAT JESUS WILL BE WITH THEM IN THE STORMS OF LIFE. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS NEED TO...) In vv. 16 &

17 we read, **"When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them."** Mark 6 vv. 45 & 46 indicate that Jesus first put the disciples in the boat and then dismissed the crowds and then went up to the mountain to pray.

(JESUS' WALK ON WATER) The disciples were not headed across the widest part of the sea, which is actually a lake. They were just headed across the northeastern corner of the lake. At its widest point, the Sea of Galilee is only eight miles across. Now it is night, and it is dark. In John's Gospel, darkness often has a symbolic significance.

In an earlier incident recorded in the other Gospels, the disciples were also caught in a storm in the lake. But Jesus was with them, though initially asleep. When he was wakened, he calmed the storm. Jesus is absent from them now as a strong wind arises. Keep in mind that several of these guys are fishermen who are well acquainted with boating on the Sea of Galilee. But still they are going to need help from Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 18: **"The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing."** The geography of this area is such that strong winds are common, especially at night. The other Gospel accounts say that the wind was against them. It was a headwind.

In Mark 6:48 (PROJECTOR ON--- MARK 6:48) we get this additional information: **"And he [Jesus] saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them."** How was it that Jesus saw the disciples in the boat? It was night, and it was dark, and it was windy. Jesus was on a hill miles away and the sea must have been churning. Was it physically possible to see the disciples in the boat at that distance and in those conditions? I doubt it. It seems more likely to me that this was Jesus in His deity who was watching the disciples in their struggle.

So these disciples are facing another trial. They think that Jesus is not with them. But is He really absent? Our text says that He saw their situation. But notice that He does not instantly solve their difficulty. Such is the case with our trials, isn't it? He often does not intervene as quickly as we wish that He would. At times we wonder if He is absent, and if He is aware of the difficulty of our situation.

Notice that v. 48 says that it is the fourth watch of the night when Jesus comes to them. The fourth watch of the night was between 3 and 6 AM. So the disciples spent much of the night trying to get across this lake. Keep in mind that they had a busy day prior to this. Perhaps some of the disciples caught a little bit of sleep in the boat. But probably none of them got very much sleep. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Back in our text in v. 19 we read, "**When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened.**" So Jesus sent them into this trying situation, and He delayed His trip to them. He allowed them to struggle for a time.

Now comes this miracle of walking on the water. It is fascinating to try to understand it. Jesus needed to rejoin the disciples. Why did He do it in this way? Could He not have travelled this distance in another way? We can't answer all of the questions that might come to mind. Certainly Jesus is demonstrating His power over nature. There is perhaps also a connection with the Moses theme. Moses led His people through the Red Sea. Jesus walks on the Sea of Galilee.

In the Ancient Near East the sea was associated with chaos. The Old Testament speaks of the sea as the home of sea monsters. (PROJECTOR ON--- PSALM 74:13-14A) In Psalm 74 vv. 13 & 14 the Psalmist writes, "**You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan...**" Jesus is walking on the sea. He is about to make it calm. He is demonstrating His power over nature. This is a sign demonstrating that Jesus is the Son of God. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Mark's Gospel says that the reason for the fear of the disciples was that they thought at first that Jesus was a ghost. There were various legends and stories about storms at sea. In one line of legends people who died at sea were said to have their spirits linger around the site of their watery grave. Perhaps knowledge of these stories was involved in the fear of the disciples. Certainly it was not normal to see the figure of any being walking on the water.

According to v. 20 in our text, "**But he [Jesus] said to them, 'It is I; do not be afraid.'**" This was a legitimate way of self-identification. But the statement of Jesus can also be translated as "I am." This expression was associated with the name of God in the Old Testament. When God sent Moses back to Egypt to lead his people out of slavery, Moses asked about whom he should say had sent him. God told Moses to tell his people that "I am" had sent him. This is indeed "I am" who is now in the boat with the disciples. They therefore have no need to fear. This is the same confidence that the people of God need

today when they find themselves in the storms of life. We want to know that "I am" is in the boat with us.

Later in this chapter Jesus will begin to describe the real Jesus in a series of "I am's." First, He will declare, "I am the bread of life."

Sometimes we are caught in the storms of life as the result of our own disobedience or bad decisions. Such was the case with Jonah, whom we studied on Sunday mornings not too long ago. He tried to run away from God, but the Lord used a storm to get his attention. Sometimes our obedience to the will of God puts us in the midst of storms. Such was the case here. Jesus Himself had told the disciples to head out into the Sea of Galilee in the boat. But Jesus had a purpose in it, and He was with them, though not physically present.

(PROJECTOR ON--- MARK 6:51) In Mark #6 v. 51 we are told, "**And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded.**" Why were they astounded? They had seen Jesus calm a storm before. But this was another first. They saw Jesus walking on the water. He got into the boat with them, and the wind did indeed stop. These guys are still learning about the historical Jesus. Trials like this were a necessary part of their educational program. They needed to learn that Jesus could absolutely be trusted in all situations. They were going to need this conviction in the further trials that lay ahead. We need to learn this as well.

Last week I referred to Psalm 23 and its relationship to the miracle of the feeding of the 5000+. (PSALM 23:1) Psalm 23 v. 1 says, "**The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.**" The Galileans, who acted like sheep without a shepherd, were provided with spiritual food and physical food. They all had more than enough. (PSALM 23:2A) Verse 2: "**He makes me to lie down in green pastures.**" Before they were fed, Jesus made the crowd sit down on the green grass in groups of fifties and hundreds. (PSALM 23:2B) "**He leads me beside still waters.**" Now Jesus appears in the boat with the disciples and calms the sea. This is the Lord who is at work in this miracle on the Sea of Galilee.

(PROJECTOR OFF) Verse 21 back in our text says, "**Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.**" Verse 51 of Mark 6 specifically says that Jesus calmed the wind. In addition, our text says that the boat was "immediately" at the land. The adverb here is common in the New Testament. It means "right away" or "very quickly." Some commentators understand this to involve a further miracle. Others suspect that with the conversation



involving Jesus in the boat and the disappearance of contrary winds, it simply means that they were on shore in no time. You can pick your interpretation.

Students of the Bible also notice in this story a fulfillment, or at least an illustration, of a description made in one of the Psalms. (PROJECTOR ON--- PSALM 107:28) Beginning in v. 28 of Psalm 107 we read, **"Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. (PSALM 107:29) He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. (PSALM 107:30) Then they were glad that the waters were quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven."**

The followers of Jesus need to recognize that Jesus will be with them in the storms of life. The story today is an illustration of the Christian life and a description of life for Christians in this present age. (PROJECTOR OFF) We often find ourselves in the boat in the midst of the storms of life. We have been given a mission by Jesus Christ to be His ambassadors in the midst of an often hostile world. But we can be confident that He is at the right hand of the Father, praying for us. He is always watching us. He sees our struggles. He knows our needs. For the sake of our maturity and the development of our faith, He does not always rescue us as soon as we would like. But we are never alone. We can also be confident that at the fourth watch of the night--- when things seem most difficult, He will physically return for us and bring us safely to the shore.

Those of you who watched the recent Winter Olympics probably saw Scott Hamilton (PROJECTOR ON--- SCOTT HAMILTON) serving as a commentator for figure skating events. He won the gold medal in figure skating in the 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo. In a sense, he had success in walking on water.

As a child, he suffered from an undiagnosed disease that stunted his growth. He seemingly went to a local skating club by accident, and that started him on his ice skating journey. He experienced considerable success in that pursuit.

In 1997 he was forced to leave his skating career to be treated for testicular cancer. As a result of his treatment, he and his wife were led to believe that they would never be able to have children. Through these struggles, God got his attention.

Scott and his wife began to have kids. (SCOTT HAMILTON FAMILY) Scott says, **"I understand that through a strong relationship with Jesus you can endure anything .... God is there to guide you through the tough spots. God was there every single time, every single time."**

Scott was then diagnosed with a brain tumor. It was at the point when he told his wife about this, and she prayed for him, that Scott finally decided to put his trust in Jesus for forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life.

It also turned out that it was this brain tumor that had stunted his growth as a child and was responsible, in a way, for getting him into skating. He says, **"Who would I be without a brain tumor? I could choose to look at it as debilitating. I could choose to focus on the suffering. I choose to look at that brain tumor as the greatest gift I could have gotten because it made everything else possible."**  
(Religion Today, 2/14/2018)

(PROJECTOR OFF) Jesus Christ is certain to send His followers into the storms of life. The issue is whether we will trust Him to be with us.