

Life Group Questions

Sep. 17th, 2023

Who Walks on Water? - Ray Harms-Wiebe - **Matthew 14:22-36**

To the Life Group leader: thank you for your ministry leading this Life Group. **Take time to review the questions, selecting those you believe will be most helpful for your group study.** You will not have time to use all the questions. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you as you lead, as you select questions, and as you guide the discussion.

NEW! I know many Life Groups have different needs from the Life Group Questions, so I'm trying something out. The commentary and questions will be formatted to hopefully make it easy for leaders to quickly know what is best for their group. There will be three types of questions:




Study the passage.



Reflect on God's truth.



Go out and apply.

For those that want to know more about the passage, there are portions called  **Diving Deeper.** Please let me know if this is helpful. Thanks!

Reconnect

Come together with these preliminary questions:

- How has God gifted you to serve Him?
- How will you serve Him this fall at Willingdon Church?
- Where has God placed you in the city? What is your role there?

Open in Prayer

Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you through the text, the questions, and each other.

Message Recap Questions

Review the message using these questions

1. What stood out to you most in this week's message?
2. What was the most meaningful thing you heard in the message? Why?
3. What questions are still lingering?

Commentary and Questions

We continue after Jesus fed the crowd of over 5,000 using one boy's meal. The crowd is happy and fed. The sun's going down. Jesus can finally have some time alone to pray. That was likely His original goal after finding out that He was on Herod's radar (Matthew 14:1-2, 13). Instead of inviting His disciples to join Him, He made them hop in a boat without Him. The Greek word here has a strong idea of "compel, force, strongly urge, press" (BDAG). Jesus was really pressuring them to get in the boat.



1. Imagine you're a disciple. Why is Jesus putting you in the boat while He stays on the shore?

Jesus and the disciples usually traveled together, so this is weird. What would you have said to Jesus? "We can help You wrap up and send everyone home." "We'll just wait for you to finish and we can travel together." Jesus tells them, "No. I need you guys to get in the boat right now." The disciples don't know it yet, but Jesus has a plan for them.



Diving Deeper: Sailing on the Sea of Galilee

Boats

Ever wondered what kinds of boats Jesus and His disciples used? In 1986 two fishermen found a boat by the Sea of Galilee. It was about 1.5 kilometers from Mary Magdalene's hometown. Archaeologists dated this boat to between roughly the 1st century BC and AD. It could fit about 13 people. This was likely the kind of boat Jesus and His disciples used. It's 8.3m (27ft) long by 2.3m (7.5ft) wide by 1.3m (4.3ft) high. As a comparison, a UPS truck is 8m (26ft) long and 3m (10ft) wide. Check out this Drive Thru History video of the boat: https://youtu.be/3N-Xcyst9po?si=xU2of0_feCFy7NZa.



Storms

"Storms often arose on the lake because of a geological feature on the western and eastern sides of the lake. The Arbela and other sheer cliffs stand on the western shore, funneling winds that blow across the lake. As these winds hit the Golan hills on the eastern side, they ricochet and blow back into the lake, causing storms and waves." (Lexham Bible Dictionary)



2. What concerns could Jesus could have been praying about?

We know that Jesus was rejected at His hometown (Matthew 13:57-58). Jesus' relative and herald, John the Baptist, was murdered by King Herod and now Herod thinks Jesus is John the Baptist back from the dead (Matthew 14:1-2, 13). In John 6:14-15 we learn that the crowd wanted to force Jesus to be their earthly king, so they missed the purpose of Jesus' mission. From a human perspective, it looks like Jesus is failing at a lot of things. Jesus is also about to walk on water.



3. Do you prioritize prayer like Jesus?

Although Jesus was fully human, He was also fully God (Philippians 2:5-7) and still regularly prayed. If Jesus needed to spend time with the Father, don't we need it even more?

Encourage your group members to share about priority of prayer in their lives. What does it reveal about their attitude towards prayer? This can be a tricky conversation. One of the best ways to get it started is to share your own struggles.

Confession time. Even as a pastor, I sometimes “forget” to pray when I’m too busy. There are so many things to do in my limited time. I need to get things done! But it reveals where my heart is. I’m not asking for God’s help because I think I can do ministry with my own ability. I’m not asking God for guidance because I assume I’m doing what God wants. I’m more worried about pleasing the people in charge than about pleasing God.

As people share, encourage them to confess their sins to God because He will forgive and cleanse (1 John 1:9). As a group gently restore and help each other to grow (Galatians 6:1). If people need help with prayer, check out Willingdon’s prayer training videos (<https://willingdon.org/program/prayer-training/>) or prayer guides (<https://willingdon.org/prayer/prayer-guides/>).



4. Imagine you’re a disciple. What are you experiencing in the storm?

The disciples hit a storm. Matthew writes the boat was “beaten” by the waves (verse 24). The Greek word is βασανίζω (bas-an-id'-zo) and means “to torture” or “subject to severe distress” (BDAG). The boat was being pushed to its limit! The disciples had been rowing all night and only gone about 5 to 6 kilometers (John 6:19). Check out this video of a storm on the Sea of Galilee to get an idea of what the disciples may have faced: <https://youtu.be/j6CR62JNmwo?si=j9g2ahLHbAFX515>.

In Bible times, literacy rates were low and books were rare. Most early Christians learned by hearing someone in church read the story out loud to the group. Imagine hearing this story for the first time. In my mind I picture a split screen. On the right Jesus is sitting on a mountain, quietly praying with the moon shining bright. It’s serene and quiet as He talks to the Father. On the left the disciples are being tossed by waves, soaked with water, cold, desperately rowing for their lives.



5. What storms are you in?

Ask your group what storms they’re facing. You already know some of the storms and you’ll likely learn of new ones. Encourage an atmosphere of vulnerability and openness by responding with care and encouragement.

In Pastor Ray’s sermon, he lists financial, campus, family, health, immigration, and national storms. Other examples are parents worried about their children starting at a new school. Others may be anxious in singleness wondering if they will find that special guy or gal. People are dealing with the consequences of some sin, like cheating on a spouse or blowing up at a colleague.

Some storms are clearly the result of something we’ve done, while others aren’t. Jonah was caught in a storm because of his own disobedience. But as Pastor Ray pointed out, the disciples were in a storm because they obeyed Jesus. Remind the group that they may be exactly where Jesus wants them to be.



6. What storms are people around you facing?

We all have co-workers, neighbors, and friends going through storms similar to our own. A big difference is that many of them don’t have hope in a loving, powerful God. Canadians are increasingly spiritually uncertain

(https://biblesociety.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Canadas-Spiritual-Landscape-2022_july22-final.pdf). They don't have hope in a higher power. Many others practice works-based religion. God's love is earned by hard work and sins are paid for by good deeds. They need to get through the storm on their own.

To help your group process, you can ask them, "What would it be like to face those storms without hope in a loving God?" or "What would it be like to survive the storm on your own?"



7. Where was Jesus during the storm? Why?

While Jesus was praying, He sees the disciples out on the sea hanging onto dear life (Mark 6:48). This is clearly supernatural. Jesus is on a mountain while the disciples are several kilometers out at sea in a ferocious storm. Jesus still knows what they're going through. He's been praying and now He knows it's time to save His disciples.

Jesus gets up and begins walking down the mountain towards the shore. Jesus doesn't hop into another boat or walk along the shore. He takes one step *onto* the water. Then another. And another. He continues walking on the water towards the disciples. Help is on the way!



8. Do you truly believe Jesus sees you and will come to you in your storm?

It's easy to say that Jesus is always with me, but sometimes it's hard to really believe it. In Mark 9 a father brings his son who was possessed by an evil spirit. He tells Jesus "But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." He believes, but there's doubt. He cries out "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). Some of your members may need to cry out to Jesus to strengthen their faith. Encourage them to cry out to God, even during the Life Group meeting. Pray together for them.

Encourage each other by sharing stories about what Jesus has done. Share about the hurt and heartache, but also how Jesus pulled through. Share how it may not have worked out the way you wanted, but Jesus somehow came to you.



9. Imagine you're a disciple. How would you react to seeing Jesus walking on water?

By the time Jesus arrives, it's the fourth watch of the night. Back then they divided the night into four "watches", each three hours. The fourth watch of the night was between 3am and 6am. They had been rowing all or almost all night long.

Imagine seeing Jesus **WALKING** on the sea. Most of us heard this story a hundred times and forgot how ridiculous that sounds. Jesus didn't meet them in a boat. He just decided to break the laws of physics and walk on top of the stormy waves. Jesus wants to make it clear He's God and in control.

The disciples think He's a ghost. The Greek word is φάντασμα (phasma) where we get the word phantasm, referring to "the spirit of a dead person, an angel, or a demon" (BEC Matthew). They're spooked. We may think this sounds crazy, but remember they're exhausted and sleep deprived. It's still before dawn, so at best there's only moonlight. Their eyes have been bombarded with water for hours. And there's a man walking on the water.

Jesus immediately comforts them. "Guys, don't be afraid. It's me!" It's amazing that Jesus' first priority is to comfort the disciples. Jesus really cares for them.



Diving Deeper: Supernatural or Natural?

Lots of people love Jesus' teachings, but don't want to believe He's God. They want to pick and choose what they like, but don't want to worship Jesus. They try to portray Jesus as simply a good moral teacher. Former US president and founding father Thomas Jefferson even cut and paste his own New Testament with Jesus' miracles removed, calling it The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jefferson_Bible).

As Christians in a secular age, we'll be challenged to accept that Jesus was only a man. Some arguments may sound convincing, but with a little preparation you'll see they don't hold any air.

For walking on water, Pastor Ray mentioned some think Jesus walked on a ledge or sand bar just underneath the water. That would be an incredible coincidence to have a ledge that led right up to where the disciples. And how in the world would Jesus know that was there? If it was close enough for Jesus to climb in the boat, the boat would have run aground.

Another explanation was proposed by a Florida State University professor of oceanography (<https://www.fsu.edu/news/2006/04/04/ice.walk/>). He believes that weather conditions created floating ice for Jesus to walk on. The theory falls apart when we see that the disciples were rowing *against* the wind. If Jesus was on floating ice, He would be floating *away* from the disciples. And again, how would Jesus find an ice path all the way to the disciples at night during a storm?

In the previous week's sermon, Pastor Ray preached on Jesus feeding a crowd of thousands. Some explanations include the disciples having a secret stash of food. If Jesus and his disciples could afford to buy enough food for up to 10,000 people, hide it in the wilderness, and then distribute the food without the crowd seeing it, He deserves a show in Las Vegas. Another explanation was that some people did have food and others didn't. The boy sharing his fish and loaves encouraged others to share, too. The miracle is therefore generosity! It wouldn't explain how they ended up with 12 baskets of extras or why they staged such a stupid stunt.

Check out the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry for more examples of attempts to de-supernaturalize Jesus' miracles:

<https://carm.org/evidence-and-answers/cant-all-jesus-miracles-be-explained-naturally/>.



10. What does Peter's response to Jesus say about his faith? How about his sinking?

Peter's reaction isn't "Jesus stop this storm!" It's "I want to join you!" It shows incredible faith to believe that Jesus can empower him to also walk on the water. Soon Peter takes his eyes off of Jesus and sees the wind and waves. He loses his focus and begins to sink. But he calls out to Jesus. It's easy to look down on Peter because he falters, but it's amazing how his reflex is to call out Jesus.

On one hand, Jesus is right. Peter does lack faith, but he was still able to walk on the water with Jesus (albeit momentarily) with such little faith. How much could Peter do if he had more?



11. What would it look like for Jesus to be with you during your storm?

For the disciples, it was comforting to know that Jesus was with them and that He had power over the storm by walking on the water.

One of the most famous Bible passages is Psalm 23. In verse 4 David sings, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me...” God doesn’t lead David *around* the valley of the shadow of death. He leads David *through* it. Following God doesn’t mean He’ll make life easy, but it does mean He will always be with us.

In Romans 8:31-39, Paul describes God’s love with great enthusiasm. He asks, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?” (Romans 8:35). “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38). Nothing can separate us from God’s love. Nothing!

So what does God want us to do to experience Him? Maybe God wants to meet you through His Word. You need to read and meditate on the Bible. (Check out Willingdon’s Discovery class on the Bible: <https://willingdon.org/discovery/bible/>. Or start a Bible reading plan: <https://willingdon.org/app/uploads/2021/08/Bible-Reading-Journal.pdf>.) Maybe God wants you to open up to other Life Group members so Jesus can love you through them. Maybe you need to experience Jesus’ peace that surpasses all understanding (Philippians 4:6-7) so you need to give your problems to God and pray. Maybe you’re just too busy and you need to slow down to hear God’s low whisper (1 Kings 19:12).

Ask group members what they need from God and what they need to do. Pray for one another. Encourage each other and see if you can be Jesus’ agents of care.



12. How will you respond when Jesus calms your storm?

When Jesus gets into the boat, the storm immediately stopped and they immediately arrived (John 6:21). Safe! What do the disciples do? They worship Jesus.

I bet some of us have run off onto the next thing when Jesus calms our storm. We’ve been waiting so long for a financial provision and God finally provides. Do we worship God or run off to enjoy what God gave us? We’ve been so lonely and God brings companionship. Do we praise God or ignore Him so we can be with them? If you’ve sinned in this area, confess your sins and find restoration.

Maybe God is waiting for you to get your heart right with Him before He calms your storm. How can you prepare yourself to thank Jesus?



13. How can you introduce Jesus to people in the storms of life?

Jesus lands on the shore and immediately He’s back to healing and bringing hope. Jesus is obsessed with getting people to experience His love and mercy. Jesus even gives us the Holy Spirit to tell people about what He has done (Acts 1:8).

If you answered question 6, you've identified people that need to know about Jesus. What can you do to share Jesus' love and hope to them? If people are stumped, offer suggestions, like praying for them, asking God for guidance, or encouraging them to take Willingdon Church's course "Discovering How to Share Your Faith" (<https://willingdon.org/discovery/share-your-faith/>). In fact, it would be a great if your group took a class together so they can all be equipped to bring Jesus to the lost around them.

Some people may have shared that their children are struggling and they don't know how to share Jesus with them. Take a look at some of Willingdon's resources for families:

<https://willingdon.org/family-resources>.

Choose Your Next Step

What next step will you commit to for the upcoming week (and beyond)?

Closing Prayer

A closing prayer is an effective way to point people back to our Loving Father as they seek to apply their new learnings throughout the week. Ask group members to share what they sense God calling them to. Pray for each other and commit to continue to do so during the week as people step out in obedience to God's leading.