

Jesus the calmer of seas and lives

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Matthew 8:23-34

Who likes to look at slight of hand “magic” tricks?

Of course, it's all about creating the illusion of doing the impossible.

One of the biggest questions that sparks interest in this kind of thing is, ‘How did they do that?’

On TV there is a show called myth-busters. I would like to watch it sometimes but, understandably, it's not Cheryl's ‘cup of tea’. Like people who are sceptics, or members of the sceptics society, these myth-busters enjoy investigating the validity or truth of whether certain events are possible or not.

So let's read **Matthew 8:23-34** and ask ourselves **THE** question, ‘**How did Jesus do that?**’

The first thing we should note is that these two stories - Jesus calming the sea and Jesus healing the demon possessed men, are also recorded for us in Mark's Gospel (4:36-41 & 5:1-20) and Luke's Gospel (8:22-25 & 8:26-38). It would seem therefore, because Matthew, Mark and Luke all included these two stories in their gospels, that they were well reported events in early Christian circles, and could have been challenged if untrue.

The story of Jesus calming the storm is one that has always enthralled me. For a few minutes, let's consider some of the facts that we know.

1] The Sea of Galilee was also known as Lake Tiberias or Lake Gennesaret. At 214 metres below sea level, it is the lowest freshwater lake on Earth. (*The Dead Sea is the lowest salt lake in the world.*) It is approximately 21 km long (N-S) and 13 km wide (E-W) and, because of the unusual geology of the surrounding land, if the winds come from the north east they have the potential to whip up a most violent storm on the lake.

2] Some of the disciples of Jesus, including James, John, Simon and Andrew, were skilled fishermen and strong sailors on the Sea of Galilee. As such, they knew the lake better than most, and they knew how best to handle a boat in dangerous conditions.

On this occasion, when Jesus got into the boat on the western shore of the lake, there appeared to be no concerns, because the disciples followed him.

Then, in vs.24 we read, 'Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake.' Now, for those who know the area, this can occasionally happen.

The question is, do you run the boat with the storm and risk smashing on the shore or do you head into the centre of the lake, where hopefully the waves are not as violent, in order to ride it out. Both options involve some difficulty and danger.

We do not know which option the disciples chose. What we are told is that the boat was being swamped by the waves and these men, experienced sailors, were in fear of the boat sinking.

Where was Jesus? He was fast asleep in the bow (the front) of the boat. How can anyone sleep in the midst of such a terrifying event?

In vs.25 we read that the disciples went to Jesus, woke him, and cried out, 'Lord, save us! We're going to drown!' Obviously, the situation had become so treacherous that even the experienced sailors among them were in fear of their lives.

What could Jesus do? He was no sailor, and yet, in utter fear and a sense of hopelessness, the disciples turned to Jesus.

You know, isn't this just like us! How often do we try to solve all our problems and difficulties **by ourselves**, and **in our own strength**?

How often do we **only** turn to the Lord Jesus when we have seemingly exhausted all other options?

Surely it would make more sense to go to Jesus first.

Oh, how I identify with these men in the boat. It was only when all their own skills and efforts had failed to solve their dilemma that they turned to Jesus.

I like the Lord's response, 'You of little faith, why are you so afraid?' Jesus nailed the real issue for these men. **It was FEAR**. They had come face to face with their own limitations and their own mortality. Here was a problem greater than their abilities, and they were afraid - unto death.

What Jesus was saying was that the source of all fear is a lack of trust in God. If we say we have faith in God to lead, direct, protect and secure us, then we have no reason to fear.

Having given the disciples something to think about, Jesus then turned to the practical problem at hand. He rebuked and ordered the natural elements to be calm, **and they were**. How did he do that?

The simple answer is that **it was not** a trick. Something far more significant happened here that is beyond our natural explanations.

Now .. Meteorologists and Climatologists will tell you that, sometimes, storms can come and go very suddenly. However, the amazing thing in this record is the timing. It was at the exact moment Jesus addressed the storm, that it ceased.

Was it a trick? Was it mere Coincidence?

I don't think so! And I think, if we had been in that boat at that time, our reactions would be the same as the disciple's; 'What kind of man is this?

Even the winds and the waves obey him!' (vs.27)

It was a reaction of incredulity and wonder.

It was a true 'WOW' moment.

In the midst of an enormous storm Jesus brought calm to an impossible situation.

The second story, or event, occurred not long after Jesus calmed the storm. When the disciples had successfully landed the boat on the Eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus was met by two demon possessed men.

Because these men had become so unmanageable, as a result of uncontrollable violence, their family and friends had sent them out of their homes and villages to live in the caves beside the lake. The area where these caves were located was actually a place where the villagers buried their dead.

It should also be noted that this region was not part of the nation of Israel, and the people were not Jewish. We know this because some of them were looking after their pigs on a nearby hillside.

It is of interest that, in the other gospels, there is mention of only one man, and in Mark's gospel we are told that, in his mania, not even chains could subdue him. Not only was he violent against others, but in Mark 5:8 we read that he would 'cut himself with stones'. He was truly a tormented man.

Regardless of whether it was one or two men, the scene was certainly one of despair and hopelessness, beyond any human solution.

Does this ring any bells? (ie. disciples in the boat.)

Today, some Psychiatrists and Psychologists may dismiss this diagnosis of demon possession as an acute form of Schizophrenia, Bipolar, or some other mental condition. Whatever your personal thoughts or opinions concerning this, the eye-witness record of Matthew is significant.

The controlling personality/personalities within the men quickly identified Jesus as representing divine authority: 'What do you want with us Son of God? Have you come to torture us before the appointed time.' (vs.29)

This was an unusual statement, to say the least, from men whose lives had been filled with mental and physical anguish, to the point that they could no longer live in normal society.

In both Mark and Luke's gospels Jesus asked the name of the demon/s and was given the name 'legion', however, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus is not recorded as having asked anything.

Also of interest, it is the demons themselves that identify the pigs as a suitable host for continuing their activities, and Jesus gave the command for them to leave the men and enter into the pigs.

The immediate result was that the men were restored to their normal mental health, and that the pigs suddenly rushed, in a mad frenzy, to their deaths in the lake.

Now, to any Jew reading this story, their response would have been delight, because pigs are an unclean animal in Jewish law. To gentiles reading this, it would have brought utter dismay, because these pigs were the very livelihood of the villagers.

To both groups there would have been the unmistakable divine authority of Jesus.

Was it another incredible coincidence that the two men were suddenly healed of their 'insanity', at the same time that the pigs ran in their crazed frenzy to their deaths?

Whatever your philosophical or cultural beliefs may be, the reality speaks for itself. Because of Jesus, the sanity of these men was healed and restored to them. The question however must once again be asked, '**How did Jesus do it**'? Again the answer lies beyond natural explanation and we are faced with an explanation that looks to the supernatural rather than the natural.

In fact, as we consider many of the 'miracles' of Jesus we are confronted with the same reality. Jesus was/is no ordinary man.

He operated outside the limitations of this naturalistic world. For him, life is more than just what we can see, taste, hear, smell and touch; and he invites us to enter into **HIS** reality, with him, on a daily basis.

In both of these stories, Jesus encountered great fear and need in impossible situations.

In both of these stories, Jesus responded by bringing **HIS** peace and calm to troubled lives.

The lesson for us today, as then, is not to expect Jesus to always be the Mr Fixit, but to learn the lessons of faith, to daily live in the peace and calm **HE** wants to give us in all of life's situations and circumstances. *[NB. Prayer, Bible, God's people]*

May the peace of the Lord always be yours in fullest measure.