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THIS WEEK'S SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

JESUS DISPELS FEAR

Golden Text.—Be of good cheer: It is I; be not afraid.—Matt. 14:27

THE LESSON AS A WHOLE

By J. C. Macaulay, D.D.

Approach to the Lesson

There are several Herods mentioned in the New Testament, and we should be able to distinguish them.

The Herod of the time of the birth of our Lord, and who massacred the infants of Bethlehem, was Herod the Great. He had the royal title, King of Judaea, from 37 B.C. to A.D.4.

Herod Archelaus succeeded his father, with the title of ethnarch. He ruled in Judaea, for which reason Joseph did not settle in Bethlehem after the return from Egypt (Matt. 2:22).

Herod Antipas was a brother of Archelaus, and became tetrarch of Galilee, holding that position to A.D. 39. He is the Herod who imprisoned and beheaded John the Baptist, and whom our Lord called "that fox" (Luke 13:32). He held a mock trial of Jesus (Luke 23:6-11).

Herod Agrippa I rose from disgrace to the royal title and a wide dominion. Favours were bestowed upon him by two emperors, Caligula and Claudius. Unlike the earlier Herods, he had Jewish blood, and espoused the Jewish cause. He enters the New Testament scene as persecutor of the church, slaying James and imprisoning Peter (Acts 12:1-3). He died of a horrible disease (v. 23) in A.D. 44.

His son, Herod Agrippa II, also rose in imperial favour and gained the royal title. He heard Paul (Acts 25:13 to 26:32) and would have freed him, but Paul's appeal to the emperor was already filed. He lived to a good age, and died in A.D. 100. The Agrippas, in some respects, were the best of the Herods, but shared many of the Herodian vices. They were all cruel, cunning, ambitious, and most of them thoroughly immoral.

It is Herod Antipas who figures in the chapter of our lesson.

Verse by Verse

Matt. 14:22.—"Jesus constrained his disciples . . . to go before . . . while he sent the multitude away." It was a delicate matter to send away a crowd intent on staying. The presence of the disciples might not have been too helpful at that point, but Jesus' wisdom was equal to the task.

Verse 23.—"He went up . . . to pray: and . . . was there alone." Another reason, if not the chief reason, for sending away the disciples. The prayer life of our Lord is a revelation of His stoop to our frame, and also of His devotion to the Father. Prayer meetings and family prayers do not take the place of private prayer.

Verse 24.—"But the ship was . . . tossed with waves; for the wind was contrary." Contrary winds are no indication that we are out of the will of God. He has not promised us a smooth voyage. Jesus sent them—into a storm.

Verse 25.—"And in the fourth watch . . . Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea." In coming to them, He entered the very situation which was disturbing them. The wind blew against Him, the waves raged around Him. "In all their affliction he was afflicted," and the rest of the verse holds for the rest of the story (Isa. 63:9).

Verse 26.—"They were troubled, saying, It is a spirit." There is not the usual word for spirit (pneuma), but phantasmas, an apparition. Bruce calls this statement of the disciples "a little touch of sailor superstition." Remember that the disciples were still "babes," not yet full-orbed apostles.

Verse 27.—"Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid." Terse phrases were needed in this situation to penetrate the frightened minds. Notice that good cheer and freedom from fear are centered in the person of Christ.

Verse 28.—"Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water." Only Peter could have thought of that! But see the beauty of it: let that which separates us become a highway to bring me to Thee!

Verse 29.—"Come. . . He walked on the water, to go to Jesus." The Lord allows many a project that seems foolish to men. Notice that Peter actually did walk on the water. If our goal is Christ, nothing can stand in the way.

Verse 30.—"He was afraid . . . Lord, save me." It was just as boisterous when he started out, but then his eyes were on the Lord. When he began to pay attention to the waves the panic seized him. But he knew where to turn in the hour of need.

Verse 31.—"O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" Peter had a grand opportunity to demonstrate the victorious life, but fear drove out faith, and a rebuke was in order. Yet Peter did more than many of us, who will not venture at all.

Verse 32.—"And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased." From the point where Jesus rescued the sinking Peter, both walked back together on the water, through the storm.

Verse 33.—"Then they . . . worshipped him, saying . . . thou art

the Son of God." This demonstration of sovereign authority over the elements awakened the minds of the disciples to perceive His divine nature. Jesus accepted worship, which even angels refused. Rev. 19:10; 22:2, 9).

The Heart of the Lesson

It is commonly thought among Christians that so long as we are in the will of God, everything will go smoothly for us. This is quite wrong. We need storms. We need the discipline of the storm. We need the exercise of faith which the storm evokes. We need the experience of the faithfulness and sufficiency of God which comes in the storm. We need the development of character which only the storm can bring. The Lord sent the disciples ahead—into a storm. Rough weather, then, is no indication that we are out of step. Only let us go at His bidding, and then whatever comes, we shall accept as from Him.

Another puzzle to many believers is the way the Lord seems to withhold Himself from them in the time of difficulty. The disciples were in the midst of the storm, and Jesus did not immediately come to them. But He had not forgotten them, nor was He neglecting them. Mark tells us that He "saw them toiling in rowing," and it is certain that as He saw them from His place of prayer, He did not fail to include them in His prayers. So when He seems to be withdrawn from us in our conflicts, we can be sure that His eye is upon us and His mighty intercessions are engaged in our behalf, while the apparent silence is to teach us to "walk by faith, not by sight."

Then He came to them—not too early—to rob them of the needed lessons, not too late to bring them the needed deliverance; and in coming He revealed Himself to them as they had not known Him before, till "they . . . worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God."

There were special lessons for Peter that day. The psalmist sings, "Thy way is in the sea, and thy path in the great waters." How true that was of Jesus that day! And then He made it true for Peter. The rough waters became Peter's path—to Jesus. True, he stumbled, but the Lord's ready help saved him. The Lord's intention is that these stormy passages in our lives should be our highways to Him, and then they will become the path on which He and His trustful child walk together, in peace and triumph.

Bible Questions And Answers

Question—Can one depend on Bible commentaries to interpret the Bible?

Answer—All commentaries give a verse-by-verse explanation of the Bible, but you will find that they vary because they are the works of men. It will depend upon which church the author belongs to as to the interpretation he puts on the Scriptures. On a whole, however, commentaries are a great help, although not inspired. However, for the real truth on many subjects, you will have to study God's Word alone.

Q.—What about modern versions of the Bible?

A.—I personally do not recommend these special Bibles. I believe the King James Version of the Bible is the best to use. Other helps may be used in the study of the Bible, but it should be remembered that they have been compiled by man and may not in all respects agree with Biblical teachings.

Q.—Can you give me any conclusive evidence on the age of the earth? There are so many different opinions, none of which seems to be based on any real facts.

A.—I am not surprised that your mind is confused, inasmuch as the colleges and universities are teaching that it has taken millions of years for the world to come into existence. The Bible is the oldest authentic record of creation that we have, and there is no reason why we should not accept it. The Bible tells us that the earth was created in six literal days and that God rested on the seventh literal day. In making the earth, He also created the weekly cycle. The weekly cycle has come down to us unbroken from the beginning. The early chapters of Genesis give the genealogy of men who lived before the Flood. We also have the genealogy of those who have lived since the Flood. This gives us a perfect record of time since the beginning. God has taken pains to tell us just how long those ancient patriarchs lived that we might know the age of the earth, which at the present time is approximately 6,000 years.

Q.—Is it true that angels are the spirits of the dead?

A.—Angels are intelligent beings being created by God, although we do not know at just what time He created them. They remain in their graves until the resurrection morning, when, at the second coming of Christ, the dead in Christ shall rise first. 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

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