STILLING THE SEA

And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. And look, there was a great earthquake under the sea, so that the boat was covered by the waves. But he himself continued sleeping. And they came to him and woke him saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" And he said to them, "Why are you so fearful, you who have such little faith?" Then when he got up, he rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. But the men marveled at all this saying, "What sort of person is this that even the winds and the sea obey him?"
Matthew 8:23-27

Something that might not seem obvious is the point being made by Matthew regarding the person of Jesus through his actions in this passage. The first is that Jesus is greater than the prophet Jonah since he is able to arise and calm the sea with a word.

Here Jesus demonstrates his divine authority and power while at the same time teaching important truths about what a disciple can expect when following him.

Matthew describes *"discipleship"* here as *"following Jesus"* and this is exactly what they do: they follow him into the boat.

Some translations use the word *"storm"* here for the commotion that takes place once Jesus and the disciples are on the sea but the Greek word for this commotion is σεισμὸς – *seismos,* which is why we have opted for the chaos being caused by an earthquake.

It's worthy to note the other two revelatory earthquakes given in Matthew. One is at the crucifixion of Jesus, and the other is at his resurrection.

The quaking of the sea in this passage foreshadows those events as Jesus is asleep here and dead in the others quaking accounts.

In the matter of discipleship, this passage teaches that following Jesus does not lead us into safe places but rather to places of danger and turmoil.

As always, Jesus is at the forefront of the passage and trust in him is where the disciple's focus should be. This leads to one of the main points of these verses: the *"little faith"* of these men.

In this sense the passage is a lesson on the danger and glory of discipleship as well as a record of even more mighty deeds given that Messiah has arrived.

Comparing this account of Matthew against Mark's version, Matthew abbreviates his.
In Mark's account, the disciples *"took him"* with them.
In Matthew's account, Jesus boards first then his disciples *"follow him."*

Mark (as well as Luke) tell of a *"great windstorm"* that arose.
Matthew tells us of a *"great earthquake."*

Mark has Jesus in the stern of the boat sleeping on cushions.
Matthew omits these details as unnecessary.

Mark has the disciples calling Jesus *"teacher."*
Matthew substitutes this language with the disciples calling him *"Lord."*

Mark has the disciples asking the question *"Do you not care that we are perishing"* when they wake Jesus.
Matthew shortens this to portion to *"Save us."*

Mark has Jesus asking the disciples, *"Have you still no faith?"*
Matthew softens this statement by Jesus asking them, *"you of little faith."*

Mark tells us that after the calming, the disciples were *"filled with a great fear."*
Matthew simply states *"they marveled."*

Mark has Jesus using the words *"Peace! Be still!"* when calming the storm.
Matthew omits the language and just presents the action of rebuking.

Mark has the disciples wondering one to another with the question: *"Who then is this?"*
Matthew has the men simply *"saying"* a question, *"What sort of person is this?"*

The structure or outline of the passage is straightforward.
1) the occasion.
2) the desperate need of the disciples with the added detail of Jesus being asleep.
3) their appeal for his help.
4) the response of Jesus.
5) their amazement which is phrased in a question.

As already mentioned, this account is similar in some ways to the story of Jonah.
1) while a great storm threatens the ship, Jonah is asleep.
2) Jonah is awakened by fearful men and asked to call upon his god so that they will not perish.
3) the storm comes to an end when the awakened Jonah is acted upon by men whereas in Matthew's account, the storm stops when the awakened Jesus acts on behalf of men.
4) in each account, the fearful men feared the Lord.

And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him.
Matthew 8:23

Given the material surrounding this passage, Matthew is clearly directing us to the understanding that this account, though centered on the power and authority of Jesus, frames that power and authority through disciples and their ongoing discipleship.

What must be understood is that these men in the boat are not the *"constituted twelve"* which will be mentioned in chapters 9 and 10. This is why Matthew simply refers to those in the boat as *"the men"* while using the designation *"disciple"* at the start of the passage.

What this accomplishes is to clearly set these *followers* aside as examples of obedience in discipleship when compared to the other two men in the previous section who claimed they wanted to follow Jesus but for the stated reasons, did not.

It also serves to set up what is about to happen to those who are faithful in following.

And look, there was a <u>great earthquake</u> under the sea, so that the boat was covered by the waves. But he himself <u>continued sleeping</u>.
Matthew 8:24

Matthew likes to gain the reader's attention with the use of the word *"look"* or *"behold."* Something is about to happen that we need to be aware of.

Again, we will make note of Matthew's mention of earthquakes and their revelatory use in his narrative. Note that his language is almost verbatim.

And <u>behold</u>, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And <u>the earth shook</u>, and the rocks were split.
Matthew 27:51

And <u>behold</u>, <u>there was a great earthquake</u>, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.
Matthew 28:2

The reason that the words *"continued sleeping"* is underscored in the verse above is because it is in the imperfect tense which means that it not only tells us *he was sleeping* but even with the commotion *he continued sleeping.* This suggests that Mattew wanted us to know this.

It's ironic that just a few verses earlier, Jesus told the Torah scholar who desired to follow him that *"the Son of Man has nowhere to lay lay head"* and here we see Matthew making mention of the one who had nowhere to lay his head oddly at peace *anywhere his head was found.*

Is Matthew pointing would-be disciples to the example being set by Jesus that with God, anxieties come under the wing of the one the disciples is trusting in?

In the Old Testament, sleep is the evidence of one's trusting in God's protection.

And you will feel secure, because there is hope;
you will look around and take your rest in security.
You will lie down, and none will make you afraid;
many will court your favor.
Job 11:18-19

I lay down and slept;
I woke again, for the Lord sustained me.
I will not be afraid of many thousands of people
who have set themselves against me all around.
Psalm 3:5-6

If you lie down, you will not be afraid;
when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.
Do not be afraid of sudden terror
or of the ruin of the wicked, when it comes,
for the Lord will be your confidence
and will keep your foot from being caught.
Proverbs 3:24-26

The very fact that Jesus is sleeping in such circumstances makes sense in context and gives validation asked by the disciples: *"What sort of person is this?"*

Given that Jesus is indeed, sleeping while the waves rage calls our attention back to a possible connection to the story of Jonah. We may be able to substantiate that Matthew is drawing that comparison when we read of the words Jesus that Matthew includes later in his narrative.

The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.
Matthew 12:41

And they came to him and woke him saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!"
Matthew 8:25

Focusing on discipleship, Matthew appropriately has the disciples coming to Jesus. Powerless, they seek rescue from the correct source.

This same language will be used later in this Gospel.

But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out,
"Lord, save me."
Matthew 14:30

Matthew is telling his readers that the Lord who saves his disciples is the same Lord who can save the corporate Body of Christ.

But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out,
"Lord, save me."
Matthew 1:21

"For the Son of Man came to save the lost."
Matthew 18:11 (not found in all translations)

When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?"
Matthew 19:25

To Matthew's readers, the concept of *perishing* and thus coming to Jesus, reaches beyond the immediate context of this story. To them and to the early church, there is timeless application.

And he said to them, "Why are you so fearful, you who have such little faith?" Then when he got up, he rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a <u>great calm</u>.
Matthew 8:26

Do not miss that there is a rebuke by Jesus here for the little faith being shown by these followers. Truly the waves would cause them fear, and this is not the problem. That comes into play when, after what they have thus far witnessed in the ministry of their Lord, they still do not appreciate their master.

It's worth noting that Matthew has Jesus asking this question *before* stilling the sea. This is in keeping with Matthew's focus of maintaining his discipleship theme while raising its impact.

If the disciples respond to an absolute call to discipleship and hence leave all and risk their lives, they must also understand that the one who calls them will also preserve them in whatever circumstances they may find themselves in.
Hagner – Matthew, page 222

Matthew simply tells us that Jesus got up and rebuked the elements. This *rebuking* is the same language used in the case of casting out an evil spirit.

And Jesus <u>rebuked</u> the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly.
Matthew 17:18

The *"great calm"* which is the aftereffect of the rebuke by Jesus is more than a mere cessation of the chaos. It points to the fact this was a mysterious and supernatural calm that testified to the power of Jesus. It also symbolized a peace and security that one who follows Jesus could experience.

Through Jesus, even *"a great earthquake"* was transformed into *"a great calm."*

But the men marveled at all this saying, "What sort of person is this that even the winds and the sea obey him?"
Matthew 8:27

Perhaps the reason Matthew simply refers to the disciples in the boat here as just *"the men"* is due to their not officially being confirmed by Jesus to that office as *the Twelve."*

Matthew's "what sort of person is this," rather the simple "who," adds emphasis to the Christological implications of the final question. It strengthens the assumption that it can be no ordinary person to whom even the elements of nature, the wind and the sea, are obedient. Power over the sea, which is often symbolic of evil or the dwelling place of evil, was regarded as especially impressive.
Hagner – Matthew, page 222

O Lord God of hosts,
who is mighty as you are, O Lord,
with your faithfulness all around you?
You rule the raging of the sea;
when its waves rise, you still them.
Psalm 89:8-9

who stills the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves,
the tumult of the peoples,
Psalm 65:7

He made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.
Psalm 107:29

If we can press the symbolism of evil, then Jesus' power over the sea is of the kind as his healings and exorcisms, and hence truly representative of the dawning of the eschatological kingdom. No conclusions were yet drawn by these disciples, but they knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus was an extraordinary person with incomparable power and authority.
Hagner – Matthew, page 222

Challenging discipleship would be the norm for these followers of Jesus. Witnessing his power and authority would be the norm as well. Both aspects are drawn together within the Person of Christ, and both aspects are projected out from the Person of Christ.

The call to discipleship will almost certainly involve an absolute demand that can often lead to dangerous situations and risks. It is here, however, where the daily life of the disciple exhibits faith; a faith that enables the disciple to look to their Master for the provision that is necessary for endurance in any storm.

All of this assurance rests in the knowledge that the Sovereign Lord who calls the disciple as his own, is also the Lord who takes care of his disciples as his own: *Even to the end of the age.*