

Matthew 14:22-33 (Romans 10:5-15) "Life Wager: Our Choice" August 13, 2017

"Lord, if it is you, command me to come out to you on the water." Peter and the other disciples were in the boat, which was being tossed by the storm. After miraculously feeding the crowd of people, Jesus had told them to go on home while he stayed behind and prayed. That night, in the midst of the turmoil, the disciples suddenly saw Jesus walking toward them, on the water. They thought that they were seeing a ghost, but Jesus calmed their fears, identifying himself to them.

Peter, though, wanted proof. "Lord, if it is you, bid me come out to you on the water." Jesus did, and Peter stepped out, but then, the Bible says, he noticed the wind, and started to sink. Jesus reached out and saved him.

Jesus questioned Peter's lack of faith... Peter was the first to step out of the boat, and the first to sink. Preachers and writers have long tried to figure it out: was Peter's lack of faith the fact that he got scared once he'd stepped out, or was it before that, when he demanded proof that it really was Jesus coming to them on the water?

Either way, we can thank God for Peter! Peter and the others were in a situation they could not control, where they were struggling, and when Jesus came to help them, Peter questioned it. "If it (really) is you, Lord, give me some proof..." And when that proof was given, and Jesus said "Come," even though Peter was able to step out onto the water, he quickly focused on the scary things around him and found it hard to trust the Lord.

In the tenth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, he laid out the basics of our Christian faith: Believe in Jesus Christ and you will be saved, for God is gracious and generous to all. What you do won't save you, even if you follow the Law compulsively to the letter. But what God has done, in Jesus, WILL save you. Just believe.

And that's the rough part: belief. When it comes to belief, we tend to be like Peter. Sometimes we are able to step forward, trusting God even if we're asking for proof; other times we can't even step out of the boat. Sometimes we seem to sink even without an identifiable storm!

Life gives us ample opportunities to test our faith. When someone hurts you or someone you love, and anger boils and there seems no way to make things right, you have a choice: to trust that Jesus really did know the best path for us when he told us to pray and love those who have become our enemies, or to let your anger cause you to sink...

When death comes into our lives, threatening us or taking someone we love, we have to choose whether to believe Jesus' promise, found in John 14: "In my father's house are many rooms; I go to prepare a place for you," or not.

When nothing seems to go right, and everybody else gets a decent job or better opportunities, when others seem to have it made and we're struggling just surviving the day, can we dare to believe that NOTHING can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8), that God really *is* with us, even to the end of the age? Jesus promised this right at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, but

it's not so easy to believe when life seems to be shaking you down.

Preacher/professor/writer Tony Campolo told of a time when God became real to him in a miraculous way that has helped him ever since to believe and to share his faith with others. In his words:

“I ... can attest to one miracle that defies any talk of natural explanation. When I was in high school, our family was very, very poor. I took a number of odd jobs trying to help out my parents. One day, I discovered there was a large bakery just a few blocks from our house that at the end of the day made bread available for sale at one-tenth of the regular price. I quickly figured out that there were some diners around that would buy that bread from me at triple the price I paid for it. So I became an entrepreneur. At nine o'clock at night, I would go to the bakery, buy a pile of bread, put it in a wagon that was tied to the rear of my bike, and sell it to the diners.

The miracle happened one night after I had delivered all the bread and was on my way home. By then, it was about eleven o'clock. There was a freezing drizzle in the air that soaked my coat and made my body shiver. I don't remember a night being any darker or colder than that one seemed to be, and as I tried to make my way home I was miserable. All of a sudden, the tire of my bicycle blew out. I had one of those old Schwinn bikes with balloon tires, and when a tire blew it did so with a bang. It's hard to describe what I thought and felt at that moment. I got off my bike, sat down on the curb, put my head in my hands, and started to cry. I was tired and I was beaten. I had tried so hard to be a good boy and earn some money for my family, and then this had to happen. I remember moaning, ‘God, everybody thinks You're good, and maybe You are to other people, but it seems like You're mean to me. How could You let this happen? Why can't You help me? You know what? I think after today, I'm just not going to believe in You anymore!’

I don't know how long I sat there, but eventually I got up and started to push my bicycle on what I knew would be a long trek home in the freezing rain. I hadn't gone very far when I noticed a gasoline station. I don't know what made me do it, but I went over to the air pump in the station and tried to put some air in the blown-out tire. Usually those pumps are turned off at the end of the day, and there was no air when the compressor wasn't working. If I had stopped to think about it, I would have known how futile it was to try to put air in that tire. It was blown out – bad! But I tried. I put the nozzle from the air pump onto the valve of my tire and pulled the lever that releases the air. Incredibly, air flowed! The tire inflated! I couldn't believe it!

I didn't hesitate. I climbed on my bike and pedaled home in the dark, saying over and over again, ‘Thank You, Jesus! Thank You, Jesus! Thank You, Jesus!’

When I got to my house, I carried my bicycle up onto the front porch and locked it up. By this time it was eleven-thirty. I put the key into the lock of the front door, and just as I was about to turn it, there was a sudden swishing sound. I turned around and watched as all the air left the tire. Within seconds, the blown-out tire was completely flat again.

In the morning, when I went to look at the tire, I saw that there was a rip on the side of it at least three inches long. The inner tube was torn apart. There's no way it could have held air for my ride

home.

Looking back on that evening, I honestly believe that God looked down and saw a kid who had been pushed just as far as he could go. ...I have a feeling that I just might have given up on the whole Christian thing if God hadn't stepped in with a miracle at that point." (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You A Story*, pp. 32-34)

In the same book, Campolo tells of a time he spoke at an Ivy League school, and a young man stood up and confronted him, "How can an educated man like you possibly believe that the Bible is true?" Tony answered him with these words:

"Because I decided to! Many years ago, I considered the various options that were available in the intellectual marketplace, and I made a decision to believe the Bible. Having made that decision, I spent the ensuing years constructing arguments and gathering information that would buttress my beliefs. But to be honest, I believed first..."

Then Campolo continued:

"Before you sit down, I have a question to ask of you. Why *don't* you believe the Bible? Isn't it because you decided *not* to? Please, don't tell me that you've read it from cover to cover, tested out what it has to say, and gained empirical evidence to contradict it. Please don't tell me that it's full of contradictions, because I don't think you could name five. I think that what you did was to decide not to believe the Bible..."

"Then I pulled out Blaise Pascal's argument called, *The Great Wager*. I said to him, 'If my faith commitment to what I believe to be true is wrong, and there is no God and the Bible is false, I will never know it. When I die, all consciousness will cease to exist. On the other hand, if your atheism proves false, you *will* know it!'" (pp. 76-77, *Let Me Tell You A Story*) (pause)

In order to believe, in order to choose to believe, a person must hear word of the Good News. Especially in our "bad-news" times, where reports of retaliation and budget deficits and cancers and misrepresentation and threats of missiles and floods and fires and broken countries and too much anger and anxiety have become our daily diet, we are starving for Good News.

In the midst of all the storms and things that would make us question whether God can possibly be here with us, we are given Good News: God made us, God is with us, God cares about us, and God has even given us a "life-line," Jesus, to turn anything that threatens to overwhelm us or undo us into an opportunity to exercise our faith in Him. No matter what is going down around us or in our lives, we can choose to believe, and then we can live as though we do.

I close with a quotation by F.B. Meyer that is profoundly meaningful to me:

"Unbelief puts our circumstances between us and God, but faith puts God between us and our circumstances."

The storms rage...the waves crash and people clash....we face rough waters... But the One who gave his life for us and who promised to be right with us through and beyond our every breath, every

day, offers us a choice: “Come.” May we dare to believe, and as we do discover and share in new ways our Savior’s power and love. Amen.