

FOLLOWING JESUS  
THROUGH THE STORMS, THE FISH,  
THE DOUBT, AND THE SEAS

# Crossing THE Waters

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## STUDY GUIDE

# DIVING DEEPER

HERE WE ALL ARE, stepping into this boat together. Maybe you've followed Jesus all your life, maybe you just met him for the first time, maybe you don't know much about him at all but are wondering what this Jewish man from long-ago Israel has to offer you. We're all in different places, and yet we're all in the same place. We face storms, and doubt, and fear, and we wonder how we're going to get through. We wonder if we can trust this man sitting on the anchor or walking across the water or teaching things we don't understand—and calling us to follow.

He is here, with us, and he's asking us to follow him into deeper waters. And even though that seems scary, *is* scary, he's worth the trust. Worth the risk.

This study guide is a way for all of us to dive a little deeper into what this book talks about. We're wandering through Galilee and crashing over waves in Alaska and talking to the disciples, and what does it all really mean for us—for me—for you? That's what this guide is the beginning of. I've included research and thoughts and questions to help you navigate your own waters, whatever they may be. So come on, step into the boat. You might be surprised what Jesus has for you on the other side.

### **How to Use This Study Guide**

As with any journey, there are a variety of paths you can take through this study guide. Personally I'd recommend reading the whole book through, gaining the broader picture of Jesus and what it means to follow him, and then approaching this guide with the fuller sense in mind. If you're more of a linear type, though, you may want to go through chapter by chapter, engaging with each story and conversation and aspect of following as you go along. Go through each chapter at your own pace. Soak in the stories, underline the things that jump out to you. Put yourself in the disciples' shoes. Imagine yourself in my knee boots in Alaska. And as you go through the study, grab your favorite journal and write down your thoughts about each of the questions. It's important to write these things down. You never know what God wants to remind you of later on.

If you're using this guide as a personal study, make sure to sit with the stories, the truths about Jesus, the realities of us. Don't hurry through. God may have some insights here especially for you.

If you're using this guide in a small group, commit to building personal, meaningful relationships with the others in your group. Because, again, we're in this boat together. Our perspectives, no matter how different they are, can help clarify one another's storms. Respect each other. Listen to each other. Love each other.

### **Tips for Group Leaders**

This study guide has twelve sessions, making it accessible for a small group seeking a twelve-week study. If you are facilitating this guide in a small group, here are a few tips:

- As much as possible, get to know your group. Recognize that everyone is wounded in some way. Set a tone of grace and trust for people to share their doubts and hurts. Be sure to share personally from your own life as well, so you don't come across as the only one who's "got it all together." Remind the members of your group that we're not here to fix one another's lives or edit someone else's story. Only God can do that.
- Start and end with prayer. You can pray, or ask others to pray, but don't force anyone to pray who may not feel comfortable. This needs to be a safe space.
- Encourage group members to read the chapter prior to each meeting. While the questions are intended to spur discussion whether or not someone has read the chapter, group members will get the most out of the discussion if they spend time in that week's chapter.
- At the start of each study session, consider asking members to identify passages they found particularly meaningful or provocative. This will refresh everyone's memory of the chapter as well as serve as an overview for those who missed reading it.
- Each session has five questions. This is intentional. We're all busy, and it's important for group members to engage with a few specific questions rather than get overwhelmed and not be able to engage. Some questions encourage group members to go deeper into Scripture, and some lead group members into more personal reflection. Allow people to speak when they feel comfortable. Depending on the amount of time you have, and how open your group is to discussing, you

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may want to focus on one or two specific questions and go deep in those.

- Before you begin your first session, ask your group to commit to creating a healthy group context. As facilitator, ensure this continues throughout the study. If one person continues to take over the discussion, gently redirect to allow others to speak. Encourage introverts to be involved in the discussion, but don't pressure them if they feel uncomfortable. And make sure everyone agrees to respect confidentiality within the bounds of the group.

I'm glad you're willing to dive deeper into these waters with me. Let's brave the waves together, knowing Jesus is walking beside us all the way.

## SESSION 1

# THE GATHERING OF THE WATERS

GOD'S WORD IS SATURATED in water. Before the earth was created, before even light and dark, sun or moon, before any creatures existed, there was water (Genesis 1:2). Water is one of the most potent metaphors and symbols in the Scriptures, appearing 722 times in the Scriptures, sweeping us all the way from Genesis to near the end of Revelation.

It's not difficult to understand why. Water is essential for all of life, of course, but beyond this, the Israelites wandered through deserts and inhabited a desert land where the scarcity of water then amplified their concern and focus. Most people settled along rivers and oases, and dug wells for access to this precious commodity.

Just as water is essential for all life, so God is essential for all life—which is probably why he so often used the metaphor of water to describe himself, his character, and what he values most:

- He describes himself as Israel's fountain of life-giving water in Jeremiah 2:13.

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- In Isaiah, water is a simile for the knowledge of God: “As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (55:10-11).
- In Hosea the rains are a sign of the presence of God: “Let us acknowledge the LORD; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth” (6:3).
- In Amos water represents social justice: “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (5:24).
- Again in Isaiah, water is the promise of blessing and renewed life: “But now listen, Jacob, my servant, Israel, whom I have chosen. This is what the LORD says—he who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you: Do not be afraid, Jacob, my servant, Jeshurun, whom I have chosen. For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants” (44:1-3).

Sometimes we can take water for granted, can't we? Turn on the tap and it's there. Grab a bottle on your way to work. Turn on the shower. It's only in the moments we're confronted with it—fighting the stormy deluge or feeling the rushing water over

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our toes on the beach or experiencing drought—that we pay attention.

But maybe, if water is so important to God, we should pay more attention.

1. Reexamine Jeremiah 2:13; Isaiah 44:1-3; 55:10-11; Hosea 6:3; and Amos 5:24. What positive attributes of water, and positive associations with water, do we see in these passages?
2. Put yourself in the shoes of the people these prophets were speaking to. What would they have heard and understood about scarcity of water? How would that have impacted their understanding of these words?
3. For my first ten summers in the Alaskan bush, I carried all our water for washing and cooking in buckets from a well up a hill and then up two sets of stairs. Because it took so much energy and time to get it there, water was a precious resource I never took for granted. So when I read these images of flowing waters as a sign of God's blessing and abundance, I feel the truth of it deeply. What memories come to mind when you think of water? What role has water played in your life? How might your experience of water connect with your understanding of God?
4. Maybe you're approaching this book with a lot of doubts. Maybe you're new to following Jesus. What do you struggle to understand about who Jesus is? What are some of your questions and doubts as you begin this study?
5. Perhaps you have been a believer in Jesus for a while. As you start this book, what questions do you still have about following Jesus? What challenges have you faced as a follower of Jesus?



## SESSION TWO

# UNDER THE WATERS

THE EXCITING EVENTS IN THIS CHAPTER—John’s baptizing of penitents in the Jordan River and then Jesus’ baptism by John—signal the beginning of something radically new for the Jewish people. And for us two thousand years later.

For the Hebrew people, John’s baptism carried weight and associations from their past: Their people were figuratively baptized when they passed through the Red Sea. So we shouldn’t be surprised when we find John the Baptist down by the Jordan River, bringing people through the Jordan, symbolically reenacting the Exodus.

John called people to a baptism of recognizing and confessing sin. But if baptism is for penitents who are turning from their sin, and if Jesus is without sin—why did Jesus insist on being baptized? There are several possible answers:

1. Jesus’ baptism was an anointing, revealing his identity as the divine Son, King, and Messiah.
2. He was asserting his own high priesthood by undergoing the Jewish cleansing rite for priests (Leviticus 8:6).

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3. He was identifying with sinners and symbolically enacting the bearing of humanity's sins under the waters of death. Later, in his death on the cross, he would fulfill that symbolic enactment.

Baptism is a profound moment for each of us today as well. We follow countless other believers into the water, going under the waters of death, which we deserve because of our sin, and then rising up into new life, cleansed of our sins because Jesus has paid for them in our place. As the Israelites walked through the Red Sea and toward God's Promised Land, we go through the water and enter into a new relationship with God: "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God" (1 Peter 2:10). As we saw from the previous chapter, water symbolizes life. In baptism God has also promised that he would do a new thing—and this is how he's doing it.

1. Read Matthew 3:1-11. What was the purpose of John's baptism? Why did he respond so harshly to the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to the baptism?
2. Read 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 and Romans 6:1-11. How was John's baptism different from baptisms done after the death and resurrection of Christ?
3. What is the role of baptism in our current church? How does it differ from the baptisms of John and the baptisms of the early church? How is it similar? Are there any ways in which baptism today should be approached differently?
4. Have you chosen to be baptized? If so, why? If not, why not?

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5. If you have chosen to be baptized, what new thing has God done in your life since? If you have yet to be baptized, what new thing might he be calling you to through baptism?

## SESSION THREE

# CALLING OUT OF WATER

AMONG THE JEWISH PEOPLE, Jesus was originally known as a rabbi, which means “teacher” or “master.” We see people encountering Jesus, addressing him as rabbi, and asking him difficult questions about the Law. But the rabbinical system was not fully established until AD 70, after the destruction of the Temple. Only then did the position become formalized with an official educational process and subsequent office. In Jesus’ day, rabbis taught the Torah in the synagogue, in synagogue schools, and to their disciples, but it wasn’t necessarily full time, and the rabbi was often from the lower or middle classes. But despite the less formalized system, people still had clear expectations of a rabbi. Expectations that Jesus would challenge and upend completely—beginning with his practice of choosing his own disciples rather than the best students choosing him.

His choice of disciples was entirely unconventional. But not for the reasons we may suppose. We often think of the fishermen in the ancient Near East as coming from the lowest rung of society, but this is not accurate. Most fishermen were solidly middle-class, as were tax collectors. The fishermen

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disciples were part of an operation that included at least two boats and at least four men, including hired men. But even so, Jesus' choices were strange. Rather than choosing among the better-educated and more sophisticated Jews in Jerusalem, he chose disciples who were not well educated and who came from a place most considered the sticks. His other choices were equally unexpected. Some of the other disciples were politically risky. Matthew (also called Levi) was a tax collector; such men were despised by the Jews because they collaborated with their Roman oppressors. Simon the Zealot was a revolutionary, stirring up the peace, trying to overthrow the Roman government.

These are the ones Jesus handpicked. And we, too, have been called to follow, though most of us aren't among those we'd expect Jesus to choose—we haven't necessarily moved across an ocean for him, or devoted all our time to evangelism, or lived among the least of these. No, we are the ones driving to the office every day, cleaning up after our kids, maybe even, as in my case, literally holding on to our nets. And most of us are called to follow right where we are.

1. What biblical principles laid out further in the New Testament seem to be at work in Jesus' choosing of the disciples? (See 1 Corinthians 1:26-31.) How does Jesus' choosing of these men give us encouragement and hope today?
2. Jesus tells the fishermen they will soon become "fishers of men." They couldn't know what this meant, of course. But they followed and obeyed anyway. What does this example reveal to us about the nature of Jesus' calling?
3. Read Matthew 4:18-22 and Mark 1:16-20. Some believe

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these passages illustrate God's "irresistible grace," meaning that when Jesus, in his sovereignty, calls, no one can resist. Others emphasize human choice. What do these passages lead us to understand about our response to God's calling?

4. Jesus called the fishermen from their nets to fish for men's souls instead of fishing for fish, but he did not call them from the world they knew. Later in John 17:15 he prays for his disciples, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one." In many ways, Jesus was calling them *more deeply* into the world and people's lives than they had experienced before. Have you experienced this similar kind of paradox in your own life as you respond to God's call? Explain.
5. The church has a long history of dividing the world into flesh and spirit, beginning with the interpretation of Matthew 4:18-22 and Mark 1:16-20: Jesus moves the disciples from fishing for fish to fishing for the souls of men. How do we understand this call today? What does it mean to follow Jesus in the midst of our flesh-and-blood everyday lives?

## SESSION FOUR

# THE CATCH OF CATCHES

CAN WE HEAR how strange these words must have sounded to the fishermen? “From now on you will catch people instead of fish.” This wasn’t normal rabbi talk. The image of throwing out a net and catching people had to be unsettling, even ludicrous. Where does it say that in the Torah?

But what was normal about any of this? A rabbi choosing his students out in a boat, when everyone is covered in fish gurry, instead of in the synagogue, bent over the words of God? Those four fishermen couldn’t have known what he meant, but right here, right from the start, Jesus was signaling something new. Something different. This was not a rabbi’s usual pitch or promise to his potential students and disciples. Disciples were the sharpest students of God’s laws and the Mishnah and Midrash, their traditions and interpretations of that law. Signing on to follow a rabbi meant becoming a more knowledgeable student. It meant they could better argue the fine points of God’s Word. But this man, this Teacher, is promising something else. He says, “You *will* catch people.” He’s promising action, not just words and knowledge. He’s promising that they will be a part

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of this action, whatever it is, not simply observers. And he's promising that their focus will be on others, not just themselves.

What did those twelve men expect when they signed on to follow Jesus? In Jesus' day, becoming the disciple of a rabbi meant primarily sitting under his teaching. It was unthinkable for a student to study Torah on his own. Rabbis were those who demonstrated a superior knowledge of God's law as well as the various interpretations and applications handed down through their history. The rabbi served as a kind of mediator between the students and the holy text, guiding the students in right understanding and application. The twelve men called into this unique relationship with Jesus expected to spend their time learning, memorizing, discussing the Scriptures under the wise tutelage of this rabbi. And they did indeed do these things.

But Jesus was not just asking them to enter into a student-teacher relationship. He was asking for far more. He was asking his followers to turn over their lives entirely to him. To give him everything they had, everything they were. But they didn't know this yet. They did know that the Greek word Jesus used for "follow," *akoloutheo*, means literally "to walk the same road." It implies companionship, partnership. They wouldn't have understood this yet, how their lives would be melded together out of love, far beyond a student-teacher relationship.

It's the same for us. Even when we raise our hand or feel our hearts yielding to Jesus, we can only grasp so much. Our faith and understanding start out small, and grow gradually over time as we learn more and more from Jesus, about this life of faith and what he asks of us. This makes the early disciples' response to Jesus' invitation all the more remarkable. They didn't know



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that much about him, but they knew enough to say yes, to drop their nets, to walk with him wherever he might take them.

Our “yes” to Jesus’ call looks different for each one of us. Peter, Andrew, James, and John laid down their nets. Matthew walked away from collecting taxes. Mary sold her most precious possession to worship Jesus. But in many ways, despite these outward differences, the act of obeying and following is the same. We are each called to “lay down our nets”—meaning, to leave the familiar, the comfortable, to step outside the structure and security we’re accustomed to and trust in the voice of the One who calls us. This doesn’t mean that Jesus calls everyone to leave her profession or his hometown. But it means a profound change in inward direction. That instead of following our own desires, fears, and plans, we choose to entrust our lives to Jesus’ plans.

We may not leave our profession. We may not pack up and leave our hometowns, but we’re abandoning ourselves and our own human efforts as the source and direction of our own lives—choosing Jesus’ path instead. And that always comes with a cost.

1. What was Jesus demonstrating by filling the fishermen’s nets with fish? Read Job 12:7-10. Based on this passage, why do you think the fishermen felt compelled to leave their nets after the greatest catch of their lives?
2. Consider the fishermen’s lack of knowledge of what they were following Jesus into. In your own life, if you have made that decision to follow Jesus, how did it happen? Was it a gradual growth of knowledge and understanding about the identity of Christ and his claim on your life,

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or was it more immediate? What were your expectations then of this new life, this new relationship with Jesus?

3. For decades, many churches and denominations have described salvation, the new birth, as “asking Jesus into your heart,” which describes an immediate response and submission to the person and call of Jesus. Is this different from following after Jesus, and if so, how? In what ways has the twenty-first-century Western church separated these two actions: belief in Jesus as the Son of God and then following him wherever he leads?
4. What are some of your questions about these events and Jesus’ call to “follow”? What makes sense? What makes you feel uncomfortable?
5. There is always a human cost to following Christ. Describe some of the costs the fishermen must have experienced as they left the life they knew to walk beside Jesus for the next three years. What are some of the costs you have experienced as you’ve followed Jesus?

## SESSION FIVE

# A FISH OR A SNAKE?

YESHUA SURPRISED HIS NEW FOLLOWERS at every turn. His first miracle, turning the water into wine, was not what they anticipated. And in Matthew 5:1-22, 43-48, Jesus continues upending expectations. He is announcing the beginning of the Kingdom of God—a new economy of abundance, seen in the provision of water to wine, seen in the mass healings and deliverances. But the people healed here are likely to get sick again, and they will all die. Clearly there is a twofold nature to the Kingdom of God: our present sufferings and our future healing and restoration. This would have been both good news and bad news to Jesus' listeners. As Jews under the heavy hand of Rome, they were waiting for a here-and-now physical deliverance through the Messiah.

We can take for granted, sometimes, his announcements about the Kingdom of God and who we are called to be in it. Many of us grew up reading about them, heard about them in Sunday school, nodded sagely as Jesus blessed the meek and the poor and the mourning. But consider with me the strangeness of it all. Jesus came announcing a new Kingdom, a new world. In

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that new world, Jesus had authority over all disease and suffering. He freely healed all who were sick and demon-possessed, giving all a taste of the coming Kingdom of Heaven, where there are no tears or mourning. But after the healings, Jesus taught them that blessing in this life here and now will look different from what we expect. We're blessed when we *don't* receive what we want. He blesses our many states of need instead of our state of fulfillment.

Don't we all want and expect fish instead of a snake? If we're following obediently, of course things will go well with us! Of course life will be easier! If God is with us, we're not going to lose our jobs! We're not going to get sick! Our kids are all going to love Jesus, and all will be well! But—maybe not. Jesus never comes to us or speaks to us in ways we expect. Sometimes the fish *is* a snake. What does that mean about our Jesus then?

1. Read John 2:1-11. What are some of the reasons Jesus' followers and the wedding guests must have been astonished at this miracle?
2. John writes, "His disciples believed in him." Yet we'll see in future events how small their faith was. What do you think the nature of their faith was at this point?
3. Read Matthew 5:1-22, 43-48. What teachings would have been particularly difficult for the listeners to hear?
4. What teachings here do we as a church seem to struggle with most?
5. We all want to avoid suffering, yet in this chapter we reflect that sometimes blessings and good come from unexpected difficulties. Looking back in your own life, how has God increased your capacity, endurance, and blessing through difficulty?

## SESSION SIX

# ROCKING THE BOAT

PARABLES WERE NOT ENTIRELY UNKNOWN to Jesus' listeners—the Old Testament presents a number of parables (Judges 9:8-15; 2 Samuel 12:1-4; Proverbs 23:29-35). We often think of the parables as simply an engaging way to teach. Jesus is universally acknowledged as a great teacher, after all, even by those who reject his claims to be the Son of God.

This chapter, however, reveals an interesting paradox. If Jesus is such an effective teacher, why then did so many of his listeners reject his message? There's a larger answer. Jesus did not speak in parables just to engage his audience. He wasn't simply telling stories of familiar places and activities because it was an enthralling teaching technique; rather, through narrative he was reshaping their understanding of their history, of their expectations of the Messiah, of even God himself. The parables depicting the Kingdom of God were often abrupt, even shocking to his audience, perhaps to unseat them from their deeply entrenched religious traditions and views. It seems, as well, that Jesus' parables were framed to require something from the listener—that they would have “ears to hear.”

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We are no different in our struggle to understand him, to believe him, to have ears to hear what he's actually saying. Perhaps we are also entrenched in our own religious traditions. So many of us have heard his Good News one way or another, and yet what kind of soil has that seed found in our lives? We can follow Jesus and still the seed struggles to take root in the face of pride or anger or fear. Do we, any of us, have ears to hear?

1. Read Matthew 13:18-23. What does it mean to have “good soil”? What things identify people who receive the seed of Good News and bear fruit?
2. Read Hebrews 4:12. What is the purpose of the Word of God? Read the surrounding context in Hebrews 4. Why is it important for us to hear and understand the Word of God?
3. How have you observed people respond to Jesus? What's the most common response? Why do you think that is?
4. What is choking out the growth of the seed in your life? What would it look like for you to have ears to hear?
5. If the seed of the Good News has taken root in our lives, if we have been made alive in Christ, our response should flow from the enormity of what God has done in choosing us. Does this joy and gratitude emerge in your life? If so, what does that look like? If not, why do you think that is?

## SESSION SEVEN

# MENDING THE WORLD

RABBIS WERE NOT SEEN AS PROPHETS, but clearly, one of the roles Jesus fulfilled was that of prophet. Prophets were called to speak God's words to God's people. The Jewish people recognized his prophetic role and often thought he was Elijah who had returned, as was foretold in the Scriptures. Because God's people had a long history of rebellion, the prophets' messages were often about judgment. Jesus' words were no exception. While many of his teachings were hopeful and comforting, Jesus *did* proclaim and warn about the coming of judgment for all those who do not respond to God's return to his people.

But in the last decade, among certain segments of the church there has been a considerable softening of the harder teachings of Christ, particularly on judgment and hell. Jesus, however, never shrank from teaching what he knew would be hard to hear. He was not interested in popularity; he was interested in speaking God's fullest truths. And if Jesus is who he says he is, then we cannot sort and parse out his words—what we want from what we don't want. Either it's all true or none is true. We either keep following—or we leave.

Jesus told seemingly simple stories that invited people in toward understanding, yet that also required faith to hear and to obey. He didn't force compliance. He didn't insist on obedience. He simply illustrated what heaven is like—and what judgment is like—enabling his listeners to see the eventual outcome of whatever choice and response they made. The same choices and outcomes are ours as well.

And if we struggle with Jesus' teachings on judgment, we need to realize that the reality of future judgment and hell is actually a force for peace and good here and now. God's coming judgment removes the need for our judgment against our offenders now. We can't judge rightly anyway—only God can judge perfectly. Only God knows people's hearts. We can step out of the cycle of violence done to us, knowing that God *will* make everything right in the end.

1. When Jesus spoke to the disciples about the purpose of parables in Matthew 13, he quoted from Isaiah 6. Read Isaiah 6:1-10. What was the context in which Isaiah heard these words? How does this further speak to the purpose of parables, particularly in relation to separation?
2. Read John 9, focusing in particular on verses 35-41. What does this text teach about the purpose of God's judgment?
3. Judgment, the idea that some people will ultimately pay for their sins, while we have been forgiven for ours because of the shed blood of Jesus Christ, can be uncomfortable to think about. What struggles do you have with the idea of judgment?
4. We all have judged others at one point or another, even if only silently. How does passing judgment on others



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contribute to the cycle of violence in our world? What would happen if you chose to fight against judging others in your own life?

5. What situations or relationships in your life need mending? What can you do to work toward peace in those circumstances?

## SESSION EIGHT

# STORMING THE PEACE

THE SEA OF GALILEE is 696 feet below sea level and is banked by 1,000-foot mountains around part of it, causing sudden violent winds. The disciples were familiar with the danger of these winds. As fishermen, and even simply as travelers across the sea, they likely had been caught in them before, and they would have known, as well, others who had been swept up in the waves. So you can imagine their fear as the storm surrounded them.

Think about this storm from the disciples' experience and perspective. They've witnessed astonishing displays of Jesus' power: over disease, over jars of water, over demons, over fish of the sea! But—he's sleeping. *He's* sleeping through the storm. He *is* a man after all. But then, when the terrified men finally awaken him, he stops the storm. So—he's not a man. But why then did he sleep through the storm?

They question his love for them. Why are you letting us go through this storm? Why are we almost dying when you're with us? Aren't you here to heal us and save us and rescue and redeem us? You chose us and now we're dying?

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We ask these questions too. Why this sickness? Why this death? Why this broken relationship?

When we choose our spouse—to follow each other through life—what do we expect from that love and that choosing? That we'll protect each other. That we'll always be with each other, as much as possible. That we'll always come to the other's aid.

Add the divine here: The One who has chosen us, and we've chosen back, has all this power! So if God is a loving God, how can evil or tragic things happen? How can bad things happen to God's people?

The fact that Jesus slept in the midst of the storm is yet one more clue, yet one more indication that the rescue Jesus was bringing the disciples was different than they thought. And it may be different from what *we* thought when we first were saved, first gave our allegiance to Christ, first said, "I want to follow you!"

When we go through a hard time—and we all go through difficult struggles—we often struggle with our faith as well. We're out in that raging storm. Is Jesus with us—or not? We can't see him. And even if he is, maybe he's sleeping.

But we can't lose sight of the fact that as soon as Jesus was awakened and he saw the fear of the men and the size of the storm, he ended the storm immediately. He chides them for their small faith—perhaps because they didn't wake him sooner? There's much to consider from this story, and all of it requires faith that God has a purpose in every storm. That there is likely a purpose even in Jesus' "sleeping" in the storm.

1. God's love in the storm often takes a form we don't expect. Read Zephaniah 3:17. What does this indicate about how God comes alongside us in our storms?

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2. Why do we often wait so long to call on Jesus when we're in the midst of a storm?
3. David's cry in Psalm 22:1-2 comes from a very human place. So often we feel like God is silent no matter how loud or prolonged our cries for his help. And David's words—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—are echoed by Jesus on the cross, during the ultimate silence. What does God's silence while Jesus hung on the cross hint about his silence during our storms?
4. Have you ever doubted God's love for you? What brought you to that place? What brought you out of it?
5. Has God ever rescued you in a way you did not expect? What did this rescue look like? How did you respond?

## SESSION NINE

# FILLING THE HUNGRY

THE INCREDIBLE FEEDING OF THOUSANDS of people is the only miracle, aside from the Resurrection, reported in all four Gospels. Yet—in many ways, this miracle was wasted on the people. None of them understood what was happening. We often think of Jesus' miracles as being performed for the sake of God demonstrating his power and identity—as God. But many of the miracles Jesus performed did not lead to faith.

Miracles alone don't produce faith. The Israelites in the desert had been rescued miraculously by ten plagues and the parting of the Red Sea, yet just days after those events, they were faithless and complaining again. God fed them miraculously in the desert every day—but they stopped seeing this.

And for any of us, miracles are never enough, not because of any insufficiency of the miracle itself or of the One performing it—Jesus—but because of our own insufficiency, our blindness. If Jesus fed the people on the mountain to show them who he was, then his mission failed. The people responded by trying to wrest him and force him to be king over them. But God's miracles are not just to show us “this is how great God is”—but to

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demonstrate what life looks like in the Kingdom of God, where every action is motivated by love.

We cannot perform the miracles that Jesus does, but his love for us can motivate us to love others in similar ways. We may not be able to multiply food, but we can feed those who are hungry. We may not be able to heal the sick, but we can tend to those who are suffering. We may not be able to calm the sea, but we can comfort the hearts of those in the midst of the storm. And we may not have the power to raise the dead, but we can point others toward the life and love that has been given to us.

1. Read Matthew 4:1-11. Why does Jesus refuse to turn stones to bread to feed himself in the desert? Contrast this to the feeding of the multitudes in Matthew 14:13-21. What is the difference?
2. The disciples were more than observers in this miracle. What part did they play? What does this say about the part we are to play in God's work?
3. What do you think the twelve baskets of leftovers symbolized or meant? What "baskets of leftovers" has God given you that you might not be seeing?
4. What miracles has God performed in your life? How did they impact your faith long-term?
5. How is God calling you to be his disciple in action this week? What hope and life as a child of God are you able to bring to someone in your life?

## SESSION TEN

# OVER THE WATERS

IN 2013, a large stone mound was discovered under the Sea of Galilee very close to where Jesus walked on the waters out to the struggling disciples. One of the archaeologists who made the discovery posited that this enormous assemblage of basalt boulders just under the surface of the water provided a platform for Jesus to “walk on the water” to the disciples in the boat. And if the stones hadn’t been in that precise position in Jesus’ day? Well, then the archaeologist suggests that with adequate funding and scientific testing, “he would be able to say with confidence that Jesus did not walk on water at that site.”<sup>1</sup> It’s the logical explanation, right? To an unbelieving world, Jesus could have walked on water only if there’d been something for him to place his feet on.

But we too are always looking for ways to deny and discredit the unnerving possibility that Jesus was and is God and that he does indeed control all the elements of creation. Most of us aren’t stupid, but we can be thickheaded and dull and slow to learn of Jesus’ ways. Even those of us who have tried to

follow him for many years make mistakes, miss him, turn to self instead of him.

The disciples' experience gives us hope. We expect to be able to trace a perfect line of growth for them. That an event would happen, Jesus would display his love and power, and the disciples would take note, learn, and then move on to the next level of knowledge. This usually didn't happen. The twelve men continued to be dull students. Not because they were stupid, but because Jesus was so utterly unlike any other person they had known.

The biggest threat we all face is not physical danger, but doubting God's relationship with us, doubting who God is, his character and his love for us. Jesus calls us not to believe in a set of dogmas, doctrines, though certainly there is substance to our beliefs. But he calls us to more; he calls us to hope and trust and believe in *someone*. He calls us into a unique relationship.

The Gospel of John gives an account of Jesus' water-walking as well. And John's story provides an intriguing detail: After Jesus identifies himself, "Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading" (6:21).

Is this another miracle, or did it just seem that Christ's comforting presence with them transformed their sense of time, and the miles and minutes flew by, delivering them to their destination? We know that Christ had the ability to transport the boat, disciples and all, to the other shore, but my sense is that the second scenario is more likely. When we are in relationship with Jesus, and when we "take him into the boat" on our stormy sea, the storm may not yet be over. But his presence chases away



## CROSSING THE WATERS

the doubts that steal our breath and our faith. Eventually, in a time of his choosing, we *will* reach the shore.

1. Read John 6:16-21. How is the “lesson” the disciples learned from this event different from the other storm experience?
2. Read Isaiah 40:25-31. Why is doubting God’s relationship with us, doubting who he is, more dangerous than physical danger?
3. Our journey of faith is never a straight line. Like the disciples, we often don’t see God’s work even when it’s happening right before our eyes. What is a work of God that you have seen only in hindsight? How does this strengthen your faith for the future?
4. What does it mean to “take Christ into the boat” in your current circumstances?
5. Too often we see God most clearly in those moments when everything else is stripped away. What are ways you can seek to see him “as fully in the living as we do in the dying?”

## SESSION ELEVEN

# UNFOLLOWING JESUS

WE TEND TO LOOK DOWN ON Peter, I think. *I don't know what you're talking about.* It's a bald-faced lie, on the surface, an outright denial of everything leading up to that point in the Gospels. But maybe, on the other hand, it wasn't a lie. Everything Peter and the other disciples had hoped and dreamed and planned for with this man Jesus had just fallen apart before their eyes. He was supposed to be the Messiah, the one to overthrow Rome, the one to rescue their people, and here he was, submitting to the murderous Romans? And when Peter fought back, ready to stand in the battle with his Messiah—Yeshua told him to put his sword away? Peter had promised to die with him, hadn't he? This was no Messiah, not the one Peter had been waiting for. *I don't know the man,* he responded to his questioner, adamant.

But Peter, unlike the other disciples, couldn't stay away that night. He had to know. Waiting, watching, wondering. And the more time that passed, the longer Jesus stayed a prisoner and moved toward crucifixion, the more vehement Peter's responses became: "Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, 'I don't know the man!'" (Matthew 26:74).

## CROSSING THE WATERS

We have defined ideas of who Jesus is, the life he's called us to, what he's going to do in us and for us and around us—and when he doesn't? When we lose the job or lose our family or lose heart and he doesn't show up the way we thought he would? When we're ready to fight, ready to stand our ground, and we look over and he's not standing with us? *I don't know the man.* Like Peter, we have created Jesus in our own image. He's not the man we thought he was. We are crushed, disillusioned. Will we, too, “unfollow Jesus”?

1. Read Job 30:16-20. What was Job expecting God to do in his situation? What did he experience instead?
2. Read Job 38:1-11. Who does God say he is? How does this speak into Job's expectations?
3. When have you felt let down by God? What things were you believing about God in that situation?
4. In what ways might you be creating Jesus in your own image?
5. Sometimes we understand Jesus, and sometimes we don't understand him at all. How do you respond to this idea that the One we want to trust above all others is often unknowable?

## SESSION TWELVE

# THE FINAL CATCH

FOLLOWING JESUS IS NEVER what we expect. We'll go through times of trust and doubt and fear. We'll experience suffering. But we discover that despite the promises of the "prosperity gospel," God came not to save his people *from* storm and suffering but to save them *through* storm and suffering. In those times, Christ comes to us just as he did to the disciples in the storm-tossed boat. We are not always saved from physical death, but we are saved from ourselves, from our fear, from our disbelief in God and his love for us.

This final passage, this final catch, is one of the most hopeful and empowering moments in all of Scripture. Peter has made many mistakes in the last three years as a disciple of Jesus, but none worse than the night Jesus was betrayed. We've all been there. We've all denied Christ in one form or another. Is there any hope for us?

Jesus is so tender and gentle here. He *knows* Peter, deeply, just as he knows us. He knows what Peter needs and what we need. Restoration. Relationship. And incredibly, in the exchange between Peter and Jesus, Peter discovers he possesses the one

## CROSSING THE WATERS

quality needed most to continue serving Jesus: love. With this love, Peter is equipped to answer Jesus' new call to "follow." The Kingdom they are proclaiming, then, is far different from the one they expected. It's not a place of power and supremacy. It won't come through the sword. The Kingdom of God is a place of forgiveness, abundance, and love, all of which Jesus demonstrated again that day of the last miraculous catch of fish. The Kingdom is far better than Peter could have imagined.

Jesus comes to us, too, in our moments of doubt and wandering, and he calls us through them. But the forgiveness and restoration he brings to us is not for us alone. It is for the restoration of many others as well. This, then, is why we're to "follow him" out now into all the world: that we may live out the Good News of the gospel wherever we are. And what is the Good News? Not that the Kingdom of God is coming, John the Baptist's words, but that the Kingdom of God is here! God has come to dwell with his people. God is truly *with us*. How? Through the coming of Jesus and the salvation he provides, through the Holy Spirit, God indwelling us, and through his living Word. Yes, we will still face empty nets at times. But we know the Jesus who walks on water, the Jesus who calms the storm, the Jesus who multiplies the fish and bread and whatever we bring to him. This abundant life in Jesus is worth proclaiming. This Jesus is worth following.

1. Read Isaiah 43:16-19. What does God tell us about himself? What does he promise?
2. How has God saved you through the storm rather than from the storm?
3. Read John 21:15-19. What one quality qualified Peter to

## STUDY GUIDE: THE FINAL CATCH

undertake this massive job of founding the church? What does Jesus mean by “feed my sheep, feed my lambs”?

4. What are some ways that we are feeding God’s sheep right now?
5. Read Matthew 28:19-20 and Mark 16:15. Peter and the other disciples did “go into all the world” with the gospel. Do we have to leave home to fulfill the Great Commission? What does “going into all the world” look like in your life?

# NOTES

## INTRODUCTION

1. Mark 12:30

## CHAPTER ONE: THE GATHERING OF THE WATERS

1. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Chicago: Moody, 2009), 92.
2. G. Reckart, "The Jewish Background of Christian Baptism," 1996, <http://jesus-messiah.com/html/mikva-baptisms.html> (accessed May 3, 2016).

## CHAPTER TWO: UNDER THE WATERS

1. Psalm 72:8, NLT
2. Zechariah 9:10-11, ESV
3. Zechariah 8:3
4. John 1:22-23, NASB
5. Genesis 6:5
6. Isaiah 61:1
7. John 1:29, author's paraphrase
8. Mark 1:11, author's paraphrase
9. "Jordan," Behind the Name, <http://www.behindthename.com/name/jordan> (accessed May 3, 2016).
10. "Jordan River," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, January 12, 2016, <http://www.britannica.com/place/Jordan-River>.
11. Luke 3:7

## CHAPTER THREE: CALLING OUT OF WATER

1. Matthew 4:20

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE CATCH OF CATCHES

1. Luke 5:8, author's paraphrase
2. Luke 5:10
3. *Ibid.*, author's paraphrase
4. Mark 10:26, author's paraphrase
5. Mark 10:28, emphasis added
6. Mark 10:29-30
7. John 14:6, NASB

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### CHAPTER FIVE: A FISH OR A SNAKE?

1. Selections from Matthew 5:2-11, 44, ESV
2. Matthew 22:33

### CHAPTER SIX: ROCKING THE BOAT

1. Mark 4:3-4, ESV
2. Mark 4:5-6, ESV
3. Mark 4:7, ESV
4. Mark 4:10, NASB
5. Matthew 13:10, author's paraphrase
6. Mark 4:13
7. Mark 4:14, author's paraphrase
8. Mark 4:9, author's paraphrase

### CHAPTER EIGHT: STORMING THE PEACE

1. Mark 4:37, ESV
2. Matthew 8:24
3. Mark 4:38
4. Mark 4:41, BSB
5. Mark 4:40, ESV, emphasis mine
6. John 2:11, CEV
7. John 1:29
8. Mark 4:41, ESV
9. Matthew 16:24

### CHAPTER NINE: FILLING THE HUNGRY

1. John 6:12
2. John 6:14
3. John 6:25-35

### CHAPTER TEN: OVER THE WATERS

1. Job 9:8, NASB
2. Mark 4:41, ESV
3. Matthew 14:33

### CHAPTER ELEVEN: UNFOLLOWING JESUS

1. Elizabeth Bishop, "One Art," *The Complete Poems 1927–1979* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 178.

### CHAPTER TWELVE: THE FINAL CATCH

1. 1 Peter 4:8

### STUDY GUIDE SESSION TEN: OVER THE WATERS

1. Karin Kloosterman, "The Mystery Mound Where Jesus Walked on Water?" Israel21c, August 25, 2013, <http://www.israel21c.org/the-mystery-mound-where-jesus-walked-on-water/>.