

Matthew 14:26

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear.

Analysis

'And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear.' The disciples' response to Jesus's approach was terror: they 'were troubled' (ἐταράχθησαν/etarachthēsan, agitated, disturbed) and 'cried out for fear' (ἀπὸ τοῦ φόβου ἔκραξαν/apo tou phobou ekrazan). They thought He was 'a spirit' (φάντασμα/phantasma, ghost, apparition). Reformed theology observes:

1. Even believers sometimes misinterpret Jesus's presence, fearing what should bring comfort
2. Supernatural encounters produce natural fear—humans tremble before divine
3. Disciples didn't expect Jesus to come this way—He often arrives differently than anticipated
4. Fear is honest response to the unknown, but Jesus addresses it (v.27).

Their terror shows they weren't fabricating the account—they genuinely feared. Yet Jesus immediately speaks comfort. The incident demonstrates that faith journey includes moments of terror, misunderstanding, and doubt even when Jesus is present. Spiritual maturity means learning to recognize Jesus in unexpected forms and circumstances, trusting Him even when His ways perplex us.

Historical Context

First-century Jewish and Greco-Roman culture believed in spirits/ghosts—disembodied souls appearing to living. Old Testament records such encounters: Samuel's spirit summoned by witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28), though this was condemned practice. In ancient mindset, seeing figure walking on water in darkness could only be supernatural—either divine or demonic. Disciples' terror was reasonable given their worldview. Modern skepticism often dismisses supernatural, but ancient world expected it. The disciples' fear shows they recognized genuinely supernatural event—not natural phenomenon or hallucination. Their cry of fear was visceral, immediate, uncontrolled—demonstrating real terror. Jesus's immediate verbal reassurance (v.27) shows He understood and addressed their fear. Throughout Scripture, angelic/divine appearances consistently produce fear requiring reassurance: shepherds at Jesus's birth (Luke 2:10), women at tomb (Matthew 28:5). The pattern: supernatural encounters evoke fear; divine messengers speak peace. Early church's Docetic heresy (denying Christ's physical body) couldn't explain this account—disciples saw and touched physical Jesus who'd walked on water.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. When have you misinterpreted Jesus's presence in your life, fearing what should have brought comfort?
2. How do you learn to recognize Jesus when He comes in unexpected ways or circumstances?
3. What does the disciples' honest fear teach about authentic faith versus pretending perfect confidence?

Interlinear Text

καὶ οἱ δόντες αὐτὸν οἱ μαθηταὶ ἐπὶ τὴν θαλάσσαν
And saw him G3588 when the disciples on G3588 the sea
G2532 G1492 G846 G3101 G1909 G2281

περιπατοῦντα ἐταράχθησαν λέγοντες ὅτι Φάντασμά ἐστιν
walking they were troubled saying G3754 a spirit It is
G4043 G5015 G3004 G5326 G2076

καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ φόβου ἔκραξαν
And for G3588 fear they cried out
G2532 G575 G5401 G2896

Additional Cross-References

Luke 24:37 (Spirit): But they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit.

Revelation 1:17 (Parallel theme): And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last:

Luke 24:5 (Parallel theme): And as they were afraid, and bowed down their faces to the earth, they said unto them, Why seek ye the living among the dead?