

THE

WONDER

WORKING

JARED C. WILSON

SEEING THE GLORY OF JESUS IN HIS MIRACLES

GOD

“Christianity is supernatural. We read the Bible and see God doing things that can’t be explained rationally. That is the God we long for, One who can do extraordinary things in and around our ordinary lives. But Christianity is about God, not just what God does. I love this book, because Jared Wilson helps us worship the miracle worker, and not settle for just wanting and worshipping miracles.”

**Darrin Patrick**, Lead Pastor, The Journey, St. Louis, Missouri; Vice President, Acts 29; Chaplain to the St. Louis Cardinals; author, *The Dude’s Guide to Manhood*

“Could it be that Jesus’s miracles were not the paranormal, but actually the true normal breaking into our world of paranormal sin corruption? Wilson gets to the biblical heart of why Jesus performed miracles—these harbingers of God’s mission to set right all that has gone so terribly wrong. Along the way, Wilson helps us hear what Jesus has to say to enlightened postmoderns, skeptics demanding apologetic proofs, and the paranormally fascinated. A soul-refreshing, gospel-drenched read.”

**Jon Bloom**, President, Desiring God; author, *Not by Sight* and *Things Not Seen*

“Jesus walked on water and healed the sick. He turned water into wine and raised men from the dead. How often we skim over these familiar stories, but as Jared Wilson writes, ‘Miraculous events in the Bible are God putting an exclamation point where he normally puts a period.’ *The Wonder-Working God* teaches us that these miracles aren’t meant only to amaze us, they are to point us to Jesus Christ himself. I’m convinced I will never read about Jesus’s life the same way again. Read it and think deeply about it as you glimpse the glory of Jesus—our Savior.

**Trillia Newbell**, author, *United: Captured by God’s Vision for Diversity*

“Jared Wilson brings his characteristic wit and careful exegesis to the often-misunderstood passages on God’s miracles in a fresh and insightful way. *The Wonder-Working God* is a timely and necessary work for the church if we are going to better understand the workings of our great God in the present age.”

**Matt Carter**, Pastor of Preaching, The Austin Stone Community Church, Austin, Texas; author, *The Real Win*

“Finally, a treatment of Jesus’s miracles that presents them more as a ‘preview of coming attractions’ and less as God’s attempt to convince skeptics of his existence—as though God has ever ‘attempted’ to do anything. As Jared shows us, Jesus’s miracles are more normal than we realize—an indicator of the way things used to be, before sin and death invaded God’s story, and a precursor of the way things will be one day, when Jesus returns to finish making all things new.”

**Scotty Smith**, Teacher in Residence, West End Community Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“Into a world where naturalism is the prevailing philosophy, Jared Wilson casts a fresh vision for the wonder-working power of the God-man, Jesus of Nazareth. This biblically engaging, Christ-exalting, and never-boring book deserves your close and attentive reading.”

**Sam Storms**, Senior Pastor, Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

“Jared Wilson’s crisp, potent, and winsome style portrays the Savior whose worth is magnified by his miraculous power. If you’re holding this book, my advice is: Buy → Read → Wonder → Worship!”

**Dave Harvey**, Pastor of Preaching, Four Oaks Church; author, *When Sinners Say I Do* and *Am I Called?*

## **THE WONDER-WORKING GOD**



# **THE WONDER-WORKING GOD**

Seeing the Glory of Jesus  
in His Miracles

**Jared C. Wilson**

 **CROSSWAY**  
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“When the real king emerges, however, and appears to view, things stand differently.”

—Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*



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# Introduction



No one believes in miracles anymore. We are much too smart for that. The earth is round and our brains are evolved. Our creation is in the lab, our resurrection in the work of the microbiologist, our ascension in the journeys of the astronaut. Who needs revelation when we have the endless diversionary enlightenment of the Internet? Who needs prophets when we have experts?

Some scientists tell us that the things we often call miracles are statistical aberrations in the natural order of things, random outliers in the overwhelmingly “normal” flow of everyday events. Most say that what we label “a miracle” is simply an illusion, a trick on the eye, a misperception misattributed. Every event has a perfectly natural explanation, they say; we simply don’t have all the data needed to explain what we’ve perceived. Scientism, which hinges on what may be observed, in this case insists that seeing is *not* believing. There are, then, rational explanations for every unexplained event, and the supernatural, by presupposition, cannot be one of them.

In this way, once again, science is pitted against religion, and to choose one is to disavow the other.

In the age of reality television and viral video, everything is extraordinary and therefore nothing is. We have no need for miracles, says the spirit of the age, because we are sufficiently advanced *and* entertained. Superstition is less and less acceptable as an explanation for the world and as an escape from the mundane life it offers.

Our miracles have become the stuff of sentiment, removed from

the world of the supernatural and safely nestled in the inspirational world of human potential. In movies such as *Miracle on 34th Street* and *The Polar Express*, the power of belief becomes the miracle. “Anything’s possible,” goes the idea, “if you just believe.” Many of us see this mantra repeated in a variety of ways every day in our Facebook newsfeeds and on Twitter.

The closest we may come to the miraculous in the popular imagination is the cultural fascination with the so-called paranormal. Vampires and zombies are the rage right now. Witches and warlocks appear to be in the next wave of occult appeal. When I was a kid, I consumed everything I could find related to UFOs, Bigfoot, and the Loch Ness Monster. Those sorts of speculative fiction are making comebacks still. My ten-year-old daughter loves the show *Fact or Faked*, wherein a team of special-effects experts and videographers examines videos of unexplained phenomena, then attempts to re-create the footage in a bid to conclude the veracity of the originals, or lack thereof. In nearly every case, they conclude that the video footage is the result of a perpetrated hoax or simple mistaken identity. However, the show succeeds not because it appeals to our inner skeptic but because it deftly raises our hopes for that one conclusive sign of something out there new, different, mysterious, out of the natural order—and real. On the popular television show *The X-Files*, FBI special agent Fox Mulder hung a now-iconic black-and-white poster on his office wall featuring a flying saucer and a caption reading, “I want to believe.”

For all of our technological advances and instantaneous access to exhaustive information, we still carve out a space for the mysterious. Many of us say we don’t. But we do. Some of our most ardent atheists have made clear their conditions for belief. They require a miracle. They don’t believe in miracles, just as they don’t believe in God, but if a miracle could be legitimately demonstrated, they claim, they would reverse their disbelief and agree that God exists.

But this is not how miracles ever worked. Even the miracles God grants to Moses in corroboration of his mission from *YHWH* to secure the children of Israel’s release from bondage only serve to

harden Pharaoh's heart. Pharaoh says, "Prove yourselves" (Ex. 7:9), but even when his demand is met, he is not satisfied (v. 13). When God sends fire to consume Elijah's wet altar and shame the prophets of Baal, there is no convincing anyone that *a* God exists but only that "The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God" (1 Kings 18:39).

Further, in the New Testament accounts of Jesus's life and ministry, miracles seem to be plentiful, but none of them is meant to convince his audiences that something like a god exists. Most of them already believe that. And divine authenticity is only the tip of the iceberg of the meaning of Jesus's miracles.

Certainly Jesus *is* God, and authenticating his deity is undoubtedly one of the functions of his miracles. But that is still scratching the surface. Jesus himself rebukes the crowds that are looking for signs. In one instance, he tells a parable of a dead man in the condemnation of hell begging Abraham for a resurrected witness to evangelize his living relatives (Luke 16:19–31). Jesus has Abraham tell the tortured man that unless there is belief in the Scriptures, a miracle won't accomplish a thing (v. 31). Jesus later tells Thomas that it is more blessed to believe *without* seeing (John 20:29).

The point is this: the miracles are more than they're cracked up to be, but probably less than we often make of them. The miracles are not the smoking gun, in other words. But they are the bright explosions of the violent spiritual campaign against evil.

Even today, the New Testament miracles do not serve so much to prove that there is a God but that the Lord is God and we are not.

It's a subtle distinction, to be sure, but the miracles in the Bible never appear to serve God proving himself so much as God *showing* himself. The Lord consistently refuses to be put on the defensive, as if he must prove his existence to the jury of mortal disbelief in order to save his life. Instead, he simply and majestically shows off. And in the biblical economy of space-time—which is the actual economy of space-time—what we eventually learn is that in a fallen and broken world groaning for redemption, the miraculous *is* the normal. By contrast, what we have come to call "normal life" is not

normal. Miracles don't turn things upside down, in other words, but rightside up.

I'll say more along those lines in chapter 1, but for the moment, let's consider this: What if the miracles in the Bible—and miracles today, should they still occur—are not God trying to convince us he's "up there somewhere," looming out there in heaven and trying on earth to get us to acknowledge him, but are actually God showing us that he is right here and right now in charge? What if, in other words, God is not an interloper in our world, but the things we find so familiarly "everyday"—sin, corruption, injustice, decay, death—these very "laws of nature," are interlopers in his?

When we are able to see the world that way, we get closer to the heart of the gospel. The miracles of Jesus serve that end, and when we see the world through the reality of the kingdom of God, the miracles become just as provocative, just as scandalous, in this day as they were in first-century Palestine. We post-postmoderns pride ourselves on being beyond all that superstitious hokum, but we place our hopes in the same sorts of sentimental magic as the ancients. We worship our accomplishments and our knowledge, because we worship ourselves. It makes no difference that our golden calves are gadgets and Google, while their golden calves were, well, golden calves. There is nothing new under the sun, quantum mechanics and particle physics notwithstanding. We seek a heaven on earth, be it natural or "supernatural," and we don't want this Jesus coming into the mix with his self-referential agitating. By reason and rationalization, we figure we can do just fine without him.

No, we don't believe in miracles anymore. We're much too smart for all that. But as it turns out, God's power is not hindered by disbelief. We don't believe in miracles. Well, okay. Turnabout is fair play, and the miracles don't believe in *us*.

The kingdom has come, is coming, and will come. You and I cannot impede this reality with our disbelief any more than we can enhance it with our allegiance. Gravity did not become a law of nature when it was discovered. Who knows how many times that treasure in the field (Matt. 13:44) was trampled over before it was found?

The miracles do nothing for those who do not have the spiritual eyes to see them. Of the five thousand who ate Jesus's miracle meal in John 6, how many do you suppose remained after he began explaining the significance? It seems from the text only a few. Even some identified as disciples abandoned the mission (v. 66).

In some instances in the Gospels, the miracles have an effect also innate to the parables—confounding witnesses as much as enlightening them.

So we may keep building our Babel towers, be they monuments to religion or rationale, and even as we keep declaring our view of how the world is, we remain confused on the way it was meant to be. Our counterfeit heavens are both too earthy and not earthy enough. And part of God's plan in the revelation of the glory of his Son Jesus is to discredit and demolish both naturalistic utopia and Gnostic bliss. Somehow in the proclamation of the gospel of Christ and his kingdom is the merging of heaven and earth, in which each becomes what it was meant to be in relation to the other and each is revealed in the uniqueness of its truth and beauty.

The miracles speak to this reality. The real heaven. Heaven as it is, breaking in and bringing the light of truth. The real earth. Earth as it once was and as it will one day be—earth *as it is right now becoming*. The miracles of Jesus reveal what we go through such great pains to deny and what some of us go through great pains to affirm. The miracles present the vision of what every human heart is yearning for.

Heaven on earth. Can it be?

# Walking Around Like He Made the Place



I once received an e-mail from a fellow who said he felt that God had been unusually hard on him. Specifically, he said he felt like a dog on a leash who had gone beyond respect for his master into the realm of fear of the next lash. He said he told God in his prayers that he wouldn't treat his own son the way God was treating him.

Do you ever feel that way? Do you feel as though God is up in heaven, manipulating you like a sadistic puppet master, pulling your strings and putting you through hell for no good reason?

The 1998 film *The Truman Show* tells the story of Truman Burbank, a mild-mannered insurance adjuster living with his pleasant wife in a pleasant home in a pleasant island village called Seahaven. Truman's entire life can be described as quaint. He has everything he needs conveniently around him in his picture-perfect community. He basically lives in a postcard.

But something inside of Truman longs to get away. He dreams wistfully of exploring the world. But there is one problem: he has a crippling fear of open water that has kept him for his entire life on the island of Seahaven. He cannot bring himself to board a boat or even cross a bridge. Still, his longing to explore will not diminish.

One day, as Truman is on his way to work, a strange metallic



object falls from the sky and crashes next to him. A radio broadcast later explains that a plane has dropped parts over the town, but Truman is still unsettled. He eventually encounters more strange phenomena. A frequency on the radio dial broadcasts what sounds like a voice narrating his every move. An open elevator shaft in a building downtown reveals no elevator but what looks like a theater's backstage area. Truman sits in his car in his driveway for long periods of time and discovers that the traffic in the neighborhood appears to be on a loop, the same vehicles and pedestrians passing the same places according to some unknown pattern.

What does it all mean?

Truman eventually discovers that his entire life is false. From birth, he has unwittingly been the subject of a television program. In an equal parts perverse and brilliant experiment, his life has become the longest running, round-the-clock reality show. All of the people in his life, including his parents and his wife—indeed, all the citizens of the town of Seahaven—are actors. And the very island itself is a complex and vast set, all residing underneath an imperceptible dome.

But Truman has seen enough. He does not want to be the star of anyone's voyeurism, so he conspires to escape the show and eventually finds himself, despite his deepest fears, jumping into a sailboat and braving the open water of the sea.

On and on he sails, as far as the world may take him.

But this world is false, controlled by a master manipulator named Christof (oddly enough), who is the genius behind the show and its director and producer. From his booth in the heavens, Christof controls the wind, rain, and ocean in the set, and he whips up a perilous storm. It makes for edge-of-your-seat television, but the risk to Truman is very real. Millions of viewers around the world watched his birth, and now they may actually witness his death.

Still Truman sails, tossed about like a rag doll on the small vessel, until he is knocked unconscious and becomes dangerously lashed to the boat. Eventually, however, the prow crashes through

the wall at the end of the experimental world. Truman triumphantly bids his puppet master adieu for good.

It's a powerful scene in a powerful movie, and my hunch is that many who watch the entire story play out resonate with some of the elements of the tale on a spiritual level. No, very few of us will ever be the stars of television shows, knowingly or unknowingly, but very many of us might see in Truman's story a resemblance to our relationships with God.

"If God is up there," many think, "he has a lot of explaining to do. I feel like I just exist to be knocked around for his entertainment. If I could, I would just check out of this world and break out of these abusive confines."

*The Truman Show* strikes a serious theological chord. But as it pertains to the biblical gospel, it falls short on one serious level. In the biblical story, the director is not simply up in the heavens, pushing buttons and pulling levers on our tumultuous journey; he is in the boat.

### Asleep at the Wheel

By the time the disciples get into their boat with Jesus in Mark 4, they have already seen and heard plenty enough to bolster their faith. In Mark's chronology, they have witnessed multiple healings, many exorcisms, and even the uncommonly powerful authority with which Jesus preaches. After one particularly long day of preaching, Jesus is ready to take a break, so they board a vessel to cross the Sea of Galilee. On the way over, our Lord falls asleep. The story that ensues is frequently called "Jesus Calms the Storm." I love that William Hendriksen in his commentary titles this passage "A Tempest Stilled,"<sup>1</sup> which could refer as easily to the God of the universe dozing on his pillow as to the storm he commands.

This incident is chronicled in all three Synoptic Gospels, but Mark's, the shortest of the three, actually contains a (slightly) more detailed account. We find this version in Mark 4:35–41:

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<sup>1</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 175.

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

In this passage, we see evidence of the incarnation. Within seven verses, Jesus is both sleeping from human weariness and speaking from divine authority. The former we can certainly understand. We know tiredness. But pastors who preach for long periods of time might feel the weariness in this text with extra resonance.

I don’t know how some of my ministry friends do it, juggling multiple services on a weekend, giving it all they’ve got each time, while still making themselves available to meet and counsel with people between sermons. I typically preach once a weekend, and when I execute my task honorably, it is surprisingly draining. It may not look like much to stand up and yell at people for thirty to forty-five minutes—okay, I’ll be honest, for forty-five minutes to an hour. But there is something I can only describe as a “psychic weight” to the act of preaching by a preacher who is conscious of taking with him into the pulpit the mantle of the gospel, the eternal stakes of spiritual power, to deliver faithfully the Word of God and give its sense (Neh. 8:8).

I have preached a few conference events that consisted of four or five hour-long sessions with only short breaks between them. Usually by the end, I don’t remember my own name and need to

go night-night. But I know men who regularly preach for much longer, and I'm in awe of them.

But Jesus blows all of us sissy preachers out of the water. He preaches for long periods of time, in the heat of the outdoors, usually accompanied by thoughtless and incompetent assistants, without the benefit of a green room or refrigerated bottled water, followed frequently by personal, deep engagements with countless needy people, many of whom he heals, restores, or delivers, apparently at the expense of more power (if Luke 8:46 is any indication), and often has to follow it all with tiresome debriefings with his disciples, where he ends up having to re-teach and re-explain most of the day's events to make sure they understand. And then, to top it all off, he apparently has no bed of his own to return to at night (Matt. 8:20)!

It is no wonder that Jesus often withdraws to lonely places to pray (Luke 5:16) and, I assume, to catch his breath and (as they say) "recharge his batteries." And it is no wonder that at the end of another apparently grueling day of real up-close-and-personal ministry, Jesus is tired and needs a nap:

And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. (Mark 4:37–38a)

Asleep! How dare he?

Jesus is able to sleep during the storm that develops because he's very, very tired. But Jesus is also able to sleep during the storm because he's very, very much in control. He may be lying down in the back of the boat with his eyes closed, but he is also firmly at the wheel. The disciples' snoring Sovereign is snoring *because* he is sovereign.

Our incarnate Lord has skin you can pierce—but only if he lets you (Luke 4:29–30; John 10:17–18).

In fact, we get no sense from any passage in any of the Gospels that Jesus Christ is ever *not* in control—not even during his arrest,

torture, and crucifixion. Everything that happens to him, he goes to willingly. He has submitted himself to the will of his heavenly Father, and this submission has entailed coming to the world not as its condemner but as its servant. He has emptied himself, not seeing his equality with the Father as something to be exploited or leveraged. On his way to the cross, he has not jumped through the divine loophole or pulled the heavenly parachute. But he is never, ever out of control—not even when he’s sleeping.

### **Jesus RSVPs the Pity Party**

Mark continues: “And they woke him and said to him, ‘Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?’” (Mark 4:38b).

It is easy to ridicule the disciples at this point, to see them in some sense as being quite dramatic. But the text does not tell us the ride is bumpy. It tells us that the boat is filling with water from the waves. If it were you or I in that boat, even if Jesus were in the flesh with us, nine times out of ten fear would trump theology. In a situation like the one described, terror is practically instinctual. In the middle of a raucous storm, boat taking on water, “We’re all gonna die!” is not a punch line. It’s a valid prediction.

And yet, Jesus is sleeping. Like the disciples, I can’t get over this. How tired do you have to be to sleep through getting knocked about in the stern of a jostling boat, getting water sloshed on you from the rising level in the bilge, let alone thunder and the frantic shouting of your friends? There is, in a way, something quite comic about this passage. And it makes the disciples’ question sort of humorous. I assume there is a level of anger in it, a smidgen of sarcasm added to the terror: “Don’t you care that we’re dying?”

Does that sound at all like any of your prayers? Does it at all resemble your theology these days? “This stuff must be happening because God doesn’t care about me.”

The cry of the disciples is as common as the human heart. Their question evinces two great temptations we face in the midst of any difficulty.

First, we are often tempted in trouble to equate worry with concern. Just as the disciples leap to conclusions about Jesus's sleeping, you and I tend to get very frustrated when others refuse to get infected with our anxiety. I've counseled quite a few married couples, for instance, who have wandered into a communication standoff in part because the wife has mistaken her husband's failure to mirror her nervousness as failure to care about the issues involved. Sometimes explaining the different ways men and women tend to process information and deal with stress helps to clear the air, as does encouraging husbands to be more vocal about their thoughts and feelings with their wives. But very often the essential breakdown comes from logic like this: "This is a very big deal. That's why I'm freaking out about it. You must not think it's a very big deal because you're not freaking out."

The reality is that sometimes people share our concern without sharing our worry. That's a good thing. And it's quite Christlike. Remember that worry is forbidden for the Christian (Matt. 6:25; Phil. 4:6) and that it won't get you anywhere anyway.

And as in Mark 4, Jesus may come to your pity party, but he won't participate. He will sit by you, loving you, caring about you, and overseeing all of your troubles, but he won't for a second share in your anxiety unless you're trying to get rid of it.

There is a reason the most repeated command in the Bible is "Be not afraid."

The second temptation we face when going through enormous difficulty is more directly theological: we tend to assume that a loving God would not let us suffer.

There is perhaps no line of thinking more dangerous, more insidious, and more utterly unchristian than this one. The cry "Do you not care that I'm perishing?" becomes the accusation "I'm perishing and you don't care," which gives way to disavowal: "If there is a God, I don't want anything to do with him. He is cruel."

Where we get the idea that Christianity excludes suffering, I don't rightly know. It likely comes mostly from our flesh, from our prideful idolization of comfort and pleasure. It comes somewhat

from just plain ol' crappy doctrine. It certainly does not come from the Bible.

In the story of the man whose house is built on the rock (Matt. 7:24–27), the firm foundation does not keep the storm away. In fact, according to the Scriptures, being a Christian means being willing to take on more suffering than the average person. Not only must we endure the same pains, stresses, and diseases of every other mortal, but we agree to take on the added burden of insults, hardships, and persecutions on account of our faith. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes:

The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.<sup>2</sup>

The call to discipleship, in other words, is not an invitation for one of those popular Christian cruises. I can see the advertisement in the Christian magazine now:

Jesus! Shuffleboard! Seafood Buffet! Join Jesus Christ and twelve other influential teachers for seven luxurious days and six restful nights on the maiden voyage of our five-star, five-story ship of dreams, the S.S. Smooth Sailing. Enjoy karaoke with your favorite psalmists on the lido deck or splash your cares away in our indoor water park with a safe crowd of people who look just like you!

Instead, Jesus calls us into nasty crosswinds in a boat specifi-

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 99.

cally designed to make us trust totally in him. And if the boat even appears to offer safety from the waves, Jesus may actually call us *out of it* and into the sea (Matt. 14:29). But in either place, he will be there with us, not to help us worry but to help us believe. Thus, it is imperative that we have our theology straight before we even get in the boat.

Besides *The Truman Show*, one of my other favorite “movies with a boat” is the 1951 John Huston classic *The African Queen*, starring Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn. The movie takes place in Africa during World War II, and Bogie plays Charlie Allnut, a curmudgeonly boat captain who agrees to transport the missionary Rose, played by Hepburn, down the river from the village of her ministry, which is a German colony, to escape the imminent return of the Nazis. Along the way, they face dangerous animals and dangerous rapids, and *The African Queen* is not a very sturdy boat. To make matters worse, a German gunship is patrolling at the mouth of the river, making escape practically impossible. At one point in their journey, Rose says, “Don’t worry, Mr. Allnut,” to which the crusty captain replies: “Oh, I ain’t worried, Miss. I gave myself up for dead back when we started.”

When Christ calls a man into the boat, he bids him give himself up for dead from the start.

### **Faith in the Master and Commander**

Jesus does care that the disciples are perishing. He may not be worried, but he is not callous:

And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea,  
“Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great  
calm. (Mark 4:39)

Herein lies a mighty picture of the sovereignty of Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:3 says that he sustains the universe by his powerful word. Surely the wind and the sea are but trifles to him. He made



them and will remake them. Certainly he can direct them with a word and a wave of his hand.

What is encapsulated in Mark 4:39 is portrayed in a similar adventure in Mark 6:45–52. Tradition tells us that Mark's Gospel was informed by the apostle Peter. It is perhaps indicative of Peter's Christ-formed humility that Mark's account forgoes what Matthew's longer account includes:

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."

And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (Matt. 14:22–33)

In both incidents, Jesus demonstrates his supreme power over nature itself. In Mark's account of the calming of the storm, the same voice that spoke the waters into existence calls out for their tranquility. Hearing the voice of their Creator, the waters obey. In the story of Jesus's walking on the water, we see further his bending the very tumult to his will.

One element in both of these stories not ascertained by the

unstudied reader is this: in the Hebrew mythos, the waters are symbolic of chaos, even evil. This is why the beast is depicted in Revelation 13:1 as coming up out of the sea. (Thus also the references in Isa. 27:1 and Ezek. 32:2.) This is not to say that these accounts in the Gospels are mythical. Neither is it to say that the Jewish people were animists of some kind. It is just that the sea held for them, traditionally and culturally, the specter of untamable wildness, deep darkness, and spiritual chaos. For Jesus to walk around on the water, in other words, is not just an impressive trick. It is a direct proclamation in deed of his authority over the spiritual forces of wickedness in the world. As in the beginning, the Creator God is “separating” order from chaos, conquering the formless void with his sovereign will expressed through his authoritative voice (Gen. 1:2–10).

Even his words of assurance in Matthew 14:27, “It is I,” are an implicit declaration of his divine control. The Greek behind the phrase “It is I” is a linguistic echo of the divine name “I AM” presented in the Exodus accounts, themselves no stranger to God’s miraculous control of water. Craig Blomberg even points out that the Greek behind the phrase “pass by,” used in Mark 6:48 in the account of Jesus walking on the water, is identical to the Septuagint’s Exodus 33:19 and 34:6, which recount how God’s glory passes by Moses, in which case what is conveyed by “passing by” is a revealing of himself.<sup>3</sup> The Lord’s use of “It is I” deserves inclusion, then, in the list of his “I am” statements constituting self-reference to his deity.

Jesus comes walking on the water, declaring in word and deed that he is God. If he is God, he is certainly the master of the seas. And if he is the master of the seas, he is certainly the commander of the seas. “Don’t be afraid,” he says as he strolls up to the side of the boat, “because it’s me.”

The statement is paralleled in Mark 4, where Jesus is not outside the boat looking in, but inside the boat *looking into* his disciples:

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<sup>3</sup>Craig Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997), 273. See also Jared C. Wilson, *The Storytelling God: Seeing the Glory of Jesus in His Parables* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 154.

## 72 The Wonder-Working God

He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” (v. 40)

At this point, the disciples are likely shocked and awed. They are shocked *by* their awe. The dozing master has hushed the storm. Do you hear the eerie quiet? Picture the previously roiling waters now like a plane of glass. Not a wave can be seen across the flat surface of the deep, save the soft ripple from the boat itself. The wind has stopped. The clouds have cleared. The scene ought to be cheerful, but it is actually quite spooky.

“F-f-faith?” one of the stunned men might stammer. “Faith in what?”

Well, first of all, that storms serve a purpose. Do you think Jesus just likes to watch his creatures squirm? No, we aren’t just floating around in the chaos of life, victims of happenstance and fortune. We do not have the god of the deists, but the God of Abraham and Isaac. We are subject to the God who set the galaxies in motion, spun the planets on their axes, poured the ancient seas, summons thunder with his fists, makes the mountains his footstool, commands the fires and the rains. We serve the God who is everlasting and all-seeing, a strong fortress and a mighty warrior. We worship this God who tabernacles with his people, who ultimately has done so by inhabiting flesh. This God will never leave us hanging—not even on a cross—because his death becomes our death (Rom. 6:8; 2 Tim. 2:11) and he did not stay dead.

So the bad things that happen to us not only are not outside of his sovereignty, they are not outside of his plan. We may not know what God is doing in our suffering, but we can trust that he is doing something!

Second, we can have faith, oddly enough, that no one dies early. He knows the number of hairs on our heads (Luke 12:7) and the number of our days. It has been appointed to man once to die (Heb. 9:27), and no one can take from you what God has allotted to you. So if you’re going to die on a boat on the ocean, you are

going to die on a boat on the ocean. But if you're not, then you're not. This should not be cause for worry but cause for confidence, because the promise for the Christian is that dying is to enter the heavenly life where there is no death. So Paul's *modus operandi* was, for instance, "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21).

I was discussing our mission trips to Honduras with some church folks once, and the subject came up that San Pedro Sula, the city we travel through on our annual journey to the country, had recently been named the most violent city in the world. The shadow of fear quickly entered the conversation. I jokingly reminded our friends: "If Jesus wants you to die in Honduras, your not going to Honduras won't matter one bit. You will go to bed one night and wake up in the morning dead in Honduras!"

Still the cry goes up, "We are perishing!"

Well, of course we are. But not a day sooner than God has ordained. And all will be well.

Third, when we put together faith that trials have a purpose and faith that no one dies early, they basically amount to faith in God. Real, genuine, self-forgetful, self-abandoned faith in God. The kind of faith that says, "Though he slay me, I will hope in him" (Job 13:15). The kind of faith that believes our God will deliver us from the fiery furnace, but even if he doesn't, we will still keep from idolatry (Dan. 3:17–18). The kind of faith that says, "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you" (2 Chron. 20:12).

And they were filled with great fear and said to one another,  
"Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"  
(Mark 4:41)

This slack-jawed question reminds me of Isaiah 63:1:

Who is this who comes from Edom, in crimsoned garments  
from Bozrah, he who is splendid in his apparel, marching in  
the greatness of his strength? "It is I, speaking in righteousness,  
might, to save."

### The Dangerous Glory

Something strikes me about the disciples' response. Jesus has already calmed the storm. And Mark 4:41 says "they were filled with great fear" *after* the storm is calmed. Why?

You would think that after Jesus has been stirred to consciousness and obligingly sends the trouble packing, the disciples would be hooting and hollering with joy, slapping each other's backs, and giving each other high fives. Instead, they go from frantic to frozen. We must ask why.

I think the answer is this: they are mortified at this moment because of the sheer awesomeness of his authoritative power on overwhelming display, but also because, from the backs of their minds comes the deeply unsettling realization that if Jesus controls the storms, it means that when there's a storm, he not only didn't stop it but allowed it, *ordained* it, even.

Don't we see this wrestling every time a tragedy strikes? Some cataclysmic natural disaster lays waste to cities and people, and the world demands that religious people answer for their God. And Christians get embarrassed. We want to be God's defense attorneys. We want to explain God's sovereignty away. We want to say: "Well, he's in control, but not of stuff like that. He's in control, but not of the bad stuff. That stuff just sort of, you know, happens."

Biblically speaking, this is nonsense.

There are a lot of reasons for difficulties and sufferings in the world, but a powerless, passive God *isn't one of them*.

This is why I hate the prosperity gospel so much. I hate it, hate it, hate it. I smell sulfur when I hear it, get a bitter taste in my mouth. The prosperity gospelists promise things God never promised and deny things he has ordained from of old, and in the end these heretics deflect sovereignty away from the triune God and toward the out-of-tune believer, and thereby send people to hell. And any theology that, when believed, sends people to hell is to be abominated.

People often ask why I occasionally angrily criticize prosperity preachers such as Joel Osteen. This is why: because he's sending people to hell. He gives people who are suffering, poor, and in need of a theology of the cross of Christ a nonexistent genie in a magic lamp, and when they aren't fixed, healed, or made prosperous, great doubt and confusion inevitably set in. They think: "Maybe God isn't loving. Maybe God isn't powerful. Maybe I don't have real faith." All because the prosperity gospelist has invited naïve people to ask comfort into their hearts and invite material goods to be their personal lord and savior. All their faith has been placed in mortal things and not on the God who purposes pain.

But the God of the Scriptures, the one true God, is sovereign over all things. And that is scary sometimes. It is spiritually discombobulating.

"Who then is this?" the disciples wonder. This is the question all of us must answer. It is a variation of the follow-up question Jesus poses in Mark 8:29 to see if they've learned anything: "Who do you say that I am?"

He is God. He is the God who ordained the storm of the cross, who did not spare his only Son, the man of sorrows, the suffering servant, who bore our afflictions in order to redeem us from sin and eternal suffering. And because he ordained the cross to be our redemption, he ordained our suffering to make us more like Jesus.

This is the whole point of Christianity! It is to glorify Jesus. It is that the Lamb might receive the reward of his suffering!

This God, incarnate in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, is the God who rules and loves. We serve a far better God than all the false gods, and not just because he's real. All the gods of the world promise health, wealth, and satisfaction, and *then don't even deliver it*. Our God may take us through a fire, but we will come out refined. He may take us through a storm, but we will come out washed. He may ask us to take up our crosses in this life, but he will deliver us safe and sound for all eternity.

The miracles that demonstrate Jesus's control of the natural world—his command of food and wine, of fish and fig trees, of waters and winds—reveal Christ as sovereign Lord, as master of the universe, as maker and therefore commander of the laws of nature. The glory these miracles reveal is that of the Creator God come to bend creation back to order. Today, the Spirit of God is roaming the earth, seeking whom he may revive, opening eyes and hearts to behold the glory of the risen Son, who commands the earth from his place seated next to his Father. He is making all things new, and he's doing it from his throne.

In my book *Gospel Wakefulness*, I included an important chapter on depression, and in that chapter I included this anecdote:

There is a story often attributed to Robert Louis Stevenson of a ship caught in a dreadful storm off a rocky coast. The hurricane winds, driving rain, and heaving waves threatened to drive the ship and its passengers into destruction. In the midst of the terror, one daring man pulled himself up the slippery stairs of the ship's hold to the deck, fearful of what he'd see. The ship tossed steeply; creaking and cracking pierced the steady whoosh of the angry sea. The moonlight in the heavy rain did not allow much vision, but the sailor held fast and gazed across the deck to the wheel of the ship. There he saw the pilot at his post gripping the wheel strongly, and bit by bit steering the ship out to sea. The pilot spotted the terrified spy and gave him a smile. Impressed, the passenger returned to the hold and sounded the news: "I have seen the face of the pilot, and he smiled at me. All is well."<sup>4</sup>

Imagine with me if you will, however, knowing what we know about our sovereign Lord from Mark 4, this alternative ending:

The curious passenger made his way back down to the hold, slipping on the wet steps, rocked side to side violently against

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<sup>4</sup>Jared C. Wilson, *Gospel Wakefulness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 161–62.

the walls, hand sliding down the rail. He stood unsteadily before his comrades and sounded the news over the roar of the storm outside: "I have made my way to see the pilot. He is asleep in the stern. All is well."

Jesus doesn't just walk around like he made the place. He rests like he does, too.



# General Index

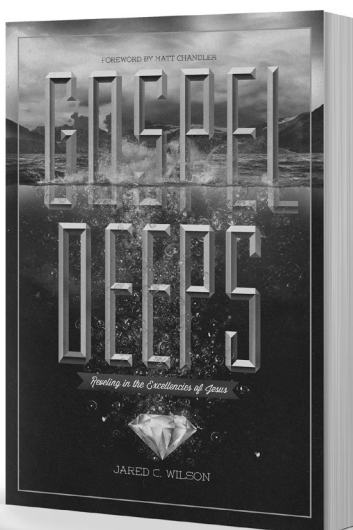
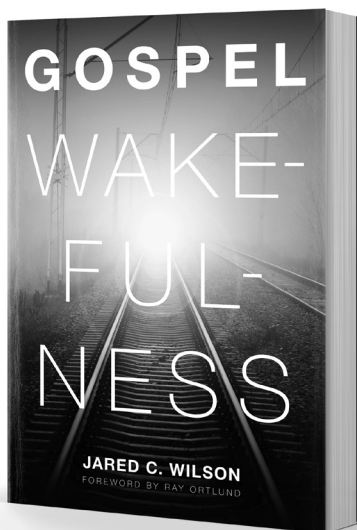
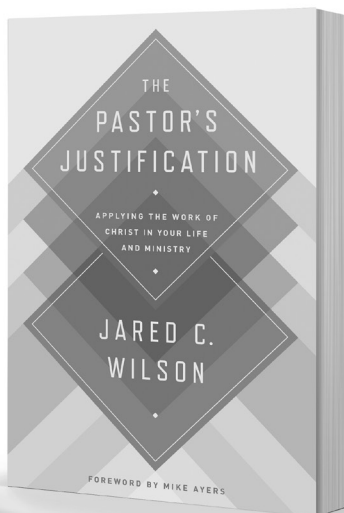
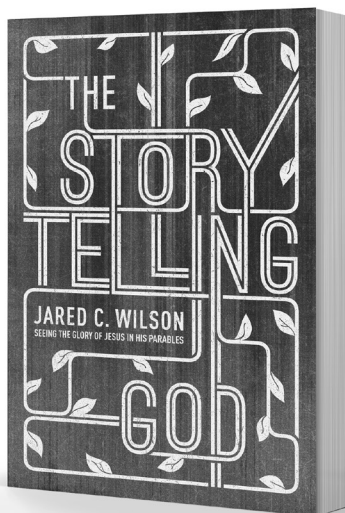
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