

*From:*

*Words for the Journey:  
Letters to Our Teenagers about  
Life + Faith  
Copenhagen + Robinson*



## 17 • Favorite Bible Stories

DEAR LAURA,

“Favorite Bible stories?” Golly, that’s a hard one. There are so many.

There are verses I hold close like, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 8:38–39).

Or “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” (Rom. 14:7–8) There are the Psalms, like Psalm 23, Psalm 27, Psalm 121, and Psalm 139—some of my favorites.

But stories? There are so many. The stories of the old geezers Abraham and Sarah, and their trickster grandson, Jacob. There’s the novella that is Joseph’s story in the book of Genesis. Moses at the burning bush, and the wild tales of the prophets, Elijah and Elisha. Naboth’s vineyard and Namaan the Syrian general are two great ones. I love the stories of Ruth, of Jonah, and of Esther.

And then there’s the New Testament. The stories of Jesus, who is kind and encouraging to people that others shun or despise, like Zacchaeus, the runty little tax collector, or the Samaritan woman, or the woman caught committing adultery. I love the story of Jesus on the Emmaus Road, walking

alongside two of his discouraged disciples, who do not even recognize him. Then, of course, the parables. The parable of the waiting bridesmaids, of the vineyard workers who are all paid the same, of the wedding feast, and of the sower who tosses seed, with abandon, everywhere.

I could go on, but you are probably getting blurry-eyed already, so I'll settle on two stories of Jesus that have meant much to me.

The first one is told by Matthew, in the fourteenth chapter of his Gospel, though similar stories are found in Mark and John also. The disciples were out on the sea, rowing for all they were worth, and getting absolutely nowhere. A strong head wind meant they were rowing in place. They saw someone walking toward them on the water. Quite naturally, they were terrified and thought what they saw was some sort of ghost. But it wasn't. It was Jesus.

When Peter realized who it was he said, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." And Jesus said, "Come." So Peter threw his big feet over the side of the boat, planted them firmly on the water, and began to walk toward Jesus. Peter was doing it—walking on water—until he realized what he was doing and, noticing the wind, took his eyes off Jesus and began to sink.

I think of it as something like learning to ride a bike. The first time you are really going on your own, you realize what you're doing and then you fall over.

The story of Peter walking on water is a wild one, one that makes a lot of people uncomfortable because they just don't get miracle stories. But the idea that Jesus calls us to step out of the boat—which is safe, even if it isn't going any place at all—makes sense to me. Most of us like to find a safe place, which is okay. But mostly God doesn't let us stay there long. One way or another, we are challenged to step out of the boat and try something we've never tried before, or to do something that is "impossible."

I've always loved Peter because he seems game for these adventures. It's true that, before long, Peter is up to his neck in the dark water and crying out for help. But at least he tries. And for a moment he even does it. He walks on water. He did it just so long as he kept his eyes and his heart fixed on Jesus. When he got distracted, when he paid attention to the howling wind, it was all over. *Glub, glub, glub.*

I've stepped out of the boat a number of times—when your mother and I got married, when I became a father, when I went to seminary, when I became a minister, when I've led congregations in new ventures, and in a hun-

dred smaller, daily ways. Often enough I've ended up in the drink, calling out for help. And usually it is because I've taken my eyes off the source of love and hope, and paid attention to my fears instead. Every now and then, however, I have planted my feet on water and walked. When I haven't, or when I get scared, I've been pulled out, put back in the boat, and before long invited to try again.

Another story that means the world to me comes from Mark's Gospel, chapter 6, although parallel accounts can be found in Matthew, Luke, and John. It is one of the Bible's best-loved stories for lots of people—Jesus feeding the five thousand.

But that title alone doesn't tell nearly the whole story. Jesus had been teaching that day to a huge crowd. They were off in some isolated, desert-type place. As the day wore on and night was coming, the disciples began to get uneasy. They were worried that they would have a big problem on their hands when the crowd got hungry and there was nothing to feed them. So they said to Jesus that he might want to send the crowd on its way before it got even later so that they could find a Burger King or something and get dinner.

Jesus, as he often does, surprised and maybe even toyed with the twelve. "Why don't you give them something to eat?" he said. "Us?" they answered, mouths hanging open in disbelief. "Why, it would take ten, maybe twenty thousand dollars to feed all these people!" "Well," said Jesus, "why don't you take a look and see what you've got."

So they did, and they came up with five loaves and two fish.

Should you become a teacher, or a minister, or a pianist, or a parent, the day will come when you look at the hungry crowd sitting before you and realize that what you've got to give them isn't much. You realize you don't have nearly enough wisdom or faith or talent or love for the need that is there, for the hunger that surrounds you and is inside you.

At which point Jesus says, "Let me have what you've got." So, you push your little loaves and dried out fish into a pile and you present it to him. When we give what we have to Jesus, and entrust it to him, he manages to do things we had never thought possible. Our little turns out to be enough, more than enough, when Jesus takes it, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to the hungry.

There have been a fair number of Sundays when what I had for a sermon seemed pretty measly fare. Not nearly enough for all the hungry people. I understand those disciples. Hungry people can scare you. If you can't

feed them, who knows, they might just eat you. But it is surprising how often, on those Sundays when it didn't seem like what I had was nearly enough, I gave it to Jesus and people came away fed.

One of the things you get to learn as a parent, too, is that you don't have enough of whatever it is you need to raise a child. Nobody is smart enough, good enough, or patient enough for the job. In fact, being a father or a mother is a great way to discover your need for the help of other people, and for God's help.

Both of these stories—Peter walking on water, and the feeding of the five thousand—are called miracle stories, and they are. But when all is said and done, the miracle is not just about Jesus. The miracle is about you, and who you are and what you will do when you trust the power in the universe that is always on the side of those who are brave enough to trust it.

LOVE, DAD

