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Matthew 18:1–5 Contemporary English Version

About this time the disciples came to Jesus and asked him who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ² Jesus called a child over and had the child stand near him. ³ Then he said: I promise you this. If you don't change and become like a child, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ But if you are as humble as this child, you are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ And when you welcome one of these children because of me, you welcome me.

Mark 6:47–50 Contemporary English Version

Later that evening he was still there by himself, and the boat was somewhere in the middle of the lake. ⁴⁸ He could see that the disciples were struggling hard, because they were rowing against the wind. Not long before morning, Jesus came toward them. He was walking on the water and was about to pass the boat.

⁴⁹ When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, they thought he was a ghost, and they started screaming. ⁵⁰ All of them saw him and were terrified. But at that same time he said, "Don't worry! I am Jesus. Don't be afraid."

Can we do it again?

Wendy and I have three kids. Before Julien was born, when Martina was three and Isabelle was an infant, I attended a scientific conference in Australia. We decided to make a family trip of it and we all enjoyed a couple of weeks in Melbourne and along the eastern Australian coast. But there were two things that didn't work out perfectly. First of all, Isabelle got very sick while we were

there, but they took fantastic care of her at the huge, modern Children's Hospital in Melbourne, and she recovered quickly.

Second, on the way back, when we were about to land in Los Angeles, the pilot came on the sound system to tell us that we had a little problem. One of the landing gears wouldn't come down. He said he was going to fly in circles over the ocean, in order to do two things: one, burn off some fuel so the tanks would be empty when we landed, and two, bounce the plane up and down a handful of times, to see if he could shake the landing gear loose. It sounded to us like he also said that the landing would be touch and go. We interpreted this to mean that it would be a dangerous landing.

There were some people who freaked out. There were three siblings traveling alone: one of them screamed nonstop, another got sick to her stomach, and another got a massive nose bleed. A couple of adults went to their aid and did their best to reassure them. There were some adults, as well, who got upset. But most people did remain calm.

The pilot told us that we were going to be landing partly on the belly of the plane. The flight attendants took over. We were told to assume crash positions, heads down. We were told that when a plane lands on its belly, there is a risk that it will catch on fire - and so we would be exiting via the inflatable yellow

slides. And, we were advised, people get hurt if they pile up on the slides, so it would be important to go down the slides quickly, stand up, and run away from the slides. We should also run in case there is a fire. The flight attendants assigned volunteers to go down the slides first and then stand at the bottom to help everyone else move away from the slides. Wendy was told to put Isabelle on the floor and to keep the baby under her feet while we landed. Her arms would not be strong enough to hang onto the baby in a crash. Wendy obeyed.

I was sitting between Martina and Wendy. I did my best to act casual with the kids, so they wouldn't be frightened. Isabelle didn't know what was happening and so she wasn't bothered. Martina looked around quizzically, very calmly taking it all in and showing no concern. She's a doctor now - by the way.

After bouncing us up and down a few times, the pilot came on the sound system again and said that the landing gear would not come down. He was going to take one practice run at landing, then pull up, loop quickly around, and then land for real. We did the practice run, coming very close to the runway, then we pulled up sharply and turned back. It was time to do it for real – landing on the belly of the plane, with one gear still up.

Okay – time for our Bible quotes. The first one, from the Gospel of Matthew, has been interpreted a couple of different ways. Some say that when

one of the Apostles asked, *“who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven”*, they were asking which of them would be the best for eternity, that is, in the afterlife in the eyes of God. Others have said that they were actually wondering which of them was the best in the eyes of Jesus specifically on Earth; this would suggest that they were competing for Jesus’ personal affection.

Then Jesus said, *“If you don’t change and become like a child, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ But if you are as humble as this child, you are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”*

This is one of a number of times where Jesus talks about the importance of humility. I do want to say that this doesn’t mean that somehow, a Christian is supposed to have low self-worth. On the contrary, it takes a strong and confident person to willingly put themselves below other people as an expression of their faith. Humility in Jesus’ teachings has more to do with one’s attitude and behavior toward others, and not with one’s attitude about one’s self.

But there is more to this statement of Jesus than urging us to be humble. In the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly shows a special love for children, and it’s important to note that biblical references to children are very significant for a reason that is difficult for us to appreciate today. At the time of Jesus, Jewish, as well as Greek and Roman children, were not free to play and have fun and run

around in public like kids today. Adults didn't smile warmly when someone's kids were crying that no, they didn't want to put their sandals on or finish their dinner. Children were kept out of the public eye. They were to never bother adults. They were viewed as very low on the social ladder at a time when the social hierarchy was extremely important in peoples' everyday lives.

So, when Jesus says that we should be humble like children, he is saying that we should act with deference toward the lowest of the low.

There is something important going on here. Remember that this scene takes place near Jerusalem. The early Christians in this area were poor Jewish converts who were not only under the thumb of the Roman authorities like all Jews but were also low ranking in the Jewish community. Only when Christianity spread to the greater Roman world did people with any true social standing become Christians. These middle-class people were gentiles.

Jesus isn't talking to socially prominent people, warning them to be modest. He's reassuring lower class people, telling people that social standing means nothing. He's telling his followers – and remember, the Apostles themselves were uneducated and very poor – that the lowly should not be ashamed of their status. And they should stop aspiring to be important like the corrupt religious leaders and the cruel Romans who had colonized their land.

There is even more. Jesus loved children. He taught us to bless them, to honor them, to treasure them. He called children toward him in public places, something that was unheard of at that time. So, when he says that we should be like children, he's saying that although it's Godly to be lowly, we should nonetheless be happy, innocent, and joyous.

We are also supposed to be teachable, like children, not thick-headed and unable to learn, like so many adults. That is how we are saved – by accepting the truth, by listening and being transformed by God's grace.

Further, we are supposed to be dependent, like children. We should hand our lives over to our savior, much like a child hands their life over to their parents.

Acting in a modest way, being satisfied with not being important, and being innocent, joyous, and teachable, and trusting wholeheartedly in God. That's how to earn a special place in the kingdom of God.

Our second quote is from the Gospel of Mark. This Gospel was written before the Gospel of Matthew was written. There is strong evidence that both Matthew and Luke had a copy of Mark's Gospel when they wrote their Gospels. Mark's Gospel is short compared to these other two, and much of what is in Mark's Gospel appears in a similar form in Luke and Matthew.

Our passage is from the early days when the Apostles were still trying to figure out just who Jesus was. They were learning what it meant to be the Messiah, the son of God. He wasn't going to conquer the Romans, like so many Jews hoped. He wasn't going to build a mighty empire on earth. His kingdom wasn't on this earth at all.

The Apostles are out on a lake in a sudden storm and they are afraid they're going to drown. Jesus comes walking by – on the water. They think he's a ghost, and in biblical times, this is bad. A ghost or a spirit or an apparition would be sent by Satan, not God. But Jesus identifies himself and says, *“Don't worry! I am Jesus. Don't be afraid.”*

Perhaps this is all there is to it. Jesus is here and there is no reason to be afraid. The most fearsome thing imaginable – an appearance of an agent of Satan – turns out to be the most blessed of things – the son of God, there to save their lives. It is a miracle story. Just when they thought the storm would take them - and then maybe an agent of Satan would take them – they are rescued.

In a variation of this theme, many call this incident in Matthew an “epiphany” story. A divine figure rises unexpectedly. Notice the passage: *“He was walking on the water and was about to pass the boat.”* Jews of the time would know from their reading of what we call the Old Testament that if

someone is walking on water, they would have to be God. So, although they were panicking, the Apostles should realize that the apparition was God. This should deal with their remaining doubts.

So, this passage tells us that when all seems lost, we need to open our eyes and see that our salvation is right in front of us. When we are in our greatest need, the son of God is there. Moreover, according to our passage from Mark, Jesus was going to walk by them on the water - and pass them by. But all they had to do was call out, and he climbed into the boat and calmed the water.

Okay, back to the airplane. The pilot turned out to be a very senior pilot and was later applauded for his extreme skill. He managed to balance the plane on the other two landing gear until the plane had almost come to a stop. Then the plane softly touched the ground. It only slid on the cement for a very short distance. The entire landing was very gentle. No injuries.

Until people went down the slides. There were a number of injuries; my memory is that one woman badly injured her neck. But there's a bit more to this. There was a flight attendant at the top of each slide, keeping people moving. As each person came to the top of a slide, a flight attendant would shout that we should jump, not sit. "Jump!" they shouted. They didn't want the slides clogging up, leading to injuries.

But my dad was a Marine and I went to Catholic schools. I obey orders in a very literal fashion. So, when I was told to jump – well, I jumped. Wendy and Isabelle had gone down the slide in front of me. I told Martina to put her arms around my neck. I held her against my chest. “Hold me as tightly as you can,” I said loudly, and I felt her arms lock around my neck. Keep in mind that I was young guy at the time – and I was a runner. My legs were strong.

So, with Martina in my arms, I took a couple step head start and jumped as hard as I could. The plane was at an odd angle because of the failed landing gear, so the slide was steeper than it would have been. I flew in the air past much of the slide and landed in the middle of it. I took a hard bounce and slid rapidly down the rest of the slide. It was a good thing that there was a volunteer at the bottom to catch us. With Martina in my arms, I ended up in the volunteer’s arms.

Then as I started to run away from the plane - as we had been told - with Martina in my arms, she looked up at me with a big grin on her face. “Can we do it again, Daddy?” she called out. “No,” I said, “Going down the slide only happens every once in a while. And when we do get to go down the slide, we only get to go down once.”

Also, we later decided that when the pilot referred to “touch and go”, he was simply referring to that first trial pass at landing.

Now, with respect to our first passage, remember that Martina was a child. She had no fear. She put her trust in me, totally. She was innocent and joyous. She was also teachable. I told her to hold on as tightly as she could, and she did. Martina behaved just the way Jesus told his Apostles to behave when they were busy competing to see who was the most important of them.

What about our second passage, where the Apostles are saved from drowning by Jesus, who cruises by, walking on the water? What does that have to do with our trip down the emergency slide? Consider this: when did the Apostles get into trouble? Just before this scene, Jesus goes off by himself to pray. And – importantly, just before he leaves, Jesus tells them to get into the boat and go across the water to a place called Bethsaida. They are left vulnerable and only by calling out to Jesus – who was going to walk by them – were they saved.

By ordering them onto the water, did Jesus set this up? Did he deliberately create a situation where the Apostles would be forced to learn that although there would be no earthly empire, he was still in charge? When I was on that plane, I was like the Apostles in that boat in a storm. My family and all the other people on that plane survived – because God decided it would happen. Perhaps that ride down that slide was God’s way of making me understand that I should hand all that I am over to God.