

Illustrated Bible Life

Master of the Depths

Many of my happiest memories are set against the backdrop of the ocean. I grew up near Los Angeles, not far from the ocean, and family outings to the beach form a large part of my childhood memories. The smell of the salt-laden air, the constant breeze from the ocean, the roar of the waves, the crying of the seagulls, the warmth of the sun—all of these memories are as clear to me now as the office I am sitting in at this moment.

Yet there is another side to these memories as well: I was afraid of swimming out into the ocean. Growing up as I did so close to the sea, I was secretly ashamed of my fear—everyone else I knew would dive in without a second thought. I liked to play around the water's edge, standing still as the surf dug hollows in the sand under my feet as it retreated to its bed, maybe following it briefly and ducking under the water for a few seconds, but quickly making my way back to shore where safety was assured. I liked digging for sand crabs and hunting for rocks and seashells, and, when I was older, walking for miles and miles down the shoreline, but swimming out into the sea? Not for me!

There was something about that huge churning mass of water that I couldn't trust. It was always an enemy, waiting to catch one off-guard, biding its time until just the right moment to sweep in and show everyone that it was not to be trifled with, that it was master of all who entered its depths.

My childhood fear of the ocean is not unlike what the ancients felt about it. For most of human history, the ocean has been a vast unknown. In ancient Israel, travel on the Mediterranean Sea was essentially limited to four months out of the year—the summer months were the only months safe for sea travel, as unpredictable storms and gale winds made travel in other months basically a suicide mission.

In our studies for this quarter, this ancient terror of the sea is countered by the true Master of the depths. Our cover photo shows Jesus asleep on the Sea of Galilee during a storm. When the terrified disciples woke Him up, He calmly took charge and stilled the sea (Mark 4:35-41). The psalmist says of God, "You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them" (Psalm 89:9).

As Daniel Powers writes in our first commentary, "God is more powerful than even the most chaotic forces imaginable. . . . It is striking to remember the words of Jesus' disciples when Jesus calmed the stormy sea: The disciples 'were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"' (Mark 4:41). The psalmist's answer is very clear: Only God himself has control of the sea and waves!"