

ON STORMY SEAS

John 6:16-21

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, Jun 8, 2008

“When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. But he said to them, ‘It is I; do not be afraid’” (Jn. 5:36).

The account of Jesus walking on water must have been Snoopy’s favorite Gospel story. I say this because Snoopy, Charley Brown’s dog from the *Peanuts* cartoon, always began his novels with the words: “It was a dark and stormy night.” So he would have enjoyed John 6:16-21, which describes just such a scene for Jesus’ disciples in their boat on the sea.

The passage does more than satisfy Snoopy’s literary tastes. It also reminds us how passionate Jesus was for the spiritual growth of his disciples. In the preceding passage, Jesus used the hungry crowd of five thousand people to teach them a lesson about ministry. Now, he sends them into the storm on the lake to teach another lesson. This reminds us that Jesus’ interest in our salvation does not cease after our conversion, but he works all through our lives to strengthen our faith.

INTO THE STORM

Jesus had fed the five thousand, but when they wanted to make him a political messiah, he “withdrew again to the mountains by himself” (Jn. 6:15). Before leaving, Jesus sent the disciples to cross the lake in a boat and wait for him on the other side (Jn. 6:16; Mt. 14:22). The disciples left in the evening, and in the night they encountered a great storm. The Sea of Galilee is located in a depression some 700 feet

below sea level and ringed by hills, many of which are quite steep. When the cold air descends from Mt. Hermon's crown at 9200 feet above sea level and crashes down against the warm air at the level of the lake, violent storms suddenly occur.

This boat provides a picture of the Church. John tells us two things that aptly describe the experience of Christians in the world, especially in trials. First, "It was now dark" (Jn. 6:17). We all know how darkness increases our terror in any danger, since we cannot see what lies ahead. Second, "The sea became rough" (Jn. 6:18). A small boat in rough seas is tossed about, distressing and threatening the lives of its crew. Changing circumstances do the same for believers, posing a threat to our health, our livelihoods, or our family relations. The Bible tells us plainly that Christians will experience such trials. Paul said, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

We see in this account three reasons why the first disciples had to endure their storm, and also why Christ's disciples today must endure trials. The first is the nature of the environment in which we live. John explains the storm by saying "a strong wind was blowing" (Jn. 6:18). The Sea of Galilee is by nature a dangerous body of water. The same may be said of our whole world: there are strong and deadly winds blowing across it.

Advertisers would have us believe that we live in a giant amusement park, where all is safe and everything can be tried and tasted without danger. Or we may be tempted to think of life as a great shopping mall, a place where we are in control and everything caters to our whims. This may explain why so many people like to spend time at amusement parks and shopping malls: they create a false sense of peace and control that we crave. But the world is really like the Sea of Galilee, which though sometimes smooth may suddenly rage with violent storms. The Old Testament commonly used the seething torrent of the sea as a symbol of the world in sin. David cries out: "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck... Deliver me from those who hate me, from the deep waters. Do not let the floodwaters engulf me or the depths swallow me up (Ps. 69:1, 14-15). This is how Christians will feel from time to time, as forces hostile to faith and godliness assail us suddenly and fiercely.

There is a second reason the disciples were faced with a storm: because Jesus sent them. Likewise, Christians will endure difficulties because of the calling of the Christian life. Unbelievers are at war with God but at peace with sin; Christians are at peace with God but at war with sin. We are the ones called to resist temptation and live against the grain of the world; this enters us into trials of mockery, persecution, and fierce combat with our sinful flesh.

It is Christ's express will that his disciples should be tried by difficulties, just as it was his will for the disciples to take their boat into the storm. Peter explained, "These [trials] have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Pet. 1:7, NIV). J. C. Ryle explains, "Trial... is part of the diet which all true Christians must expect. It is one of the means by which their grace is proved, and by which they find out what there is in themselves. Winter as well as summer, cold as well as heat, clouds as well as sunshine – are all necessary to bring the fruit of the Spirit to ripeness and maturity."¹

Note also that it was immediately after the refreshing encouragement of the miraculous feeding that Jesus ordained a storm for the disciples. George Hutchinson explains, "It is not unusual that upon the back of sweetest refreshments and manifestations of Christ the people of God meet with a stormy and sharp exercise."² Our sweetest times of communion are often meant to prepare us for trials to come, and trials are intended to cure us of spiritual pride or presumption.

The third reason the disciples were subjected to this storm is less obvious, but equally important: because they obeyed Jesus' command. It is true that God sends some storms to chasten us for disobedience, as Jonah learned when he fled from God's command. But many Christians err by thinking themselves "out of the center of God's will" simply because they experience trials. Kent Hughes reminds us:

Moses would never have felt rejected by a complaining people if at the burning bush he had decided not to obey Jehovah. Daniel would never

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), I:101.

² George Hutchinson, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001), 102.

have had to face a lion's den if he had not decided to be faithful to God. Just think of how much persecution Paul would have avoided if he had just stayed in Tarsus. But then these great men would have never known the refreshing winds of the Holy Spirit flowing through their lives.³

What, then, are we to do in the face of trials? We are to do what the disciples did: keep rowing in obedience to God's commands. The wind was in their face, impeding their progress, and in the night they must have veered back and forth from the course. John says they only were able to row "about three or four miles" (Jn. 6:19), and according to Matthew, they were still "a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them" (Mt. 14:24).

This teaches an important precept for Christians. Like the disciples in their boat, our ministry and witness face directly against the prevailing winds of worldly ideas and cultural fashion. The record of church history shows that Christian truth is constantly opposed by some new heresy or change in cultural trends. This is why, apart from special blessings from God's Spirit, Christian ministry will be difficult, with results that are sometimes disappointing. But what should we do?

Some Christians conclude that we must shift our course to benefit from new winds of worldly trends. If our worship and teaching were just slightly more worldly, and if we made the right compromises of doctrine or practice, they think we could make better headway. But that is not what the disciples did. Instead, they kept rowing, kept going on course, no doubt with some discouragement and great aches in their muscles.

The problem with too many churches in their ministry, too many parents in the Christian nurture of their children, and too many believers in their walk of faith with God, is that they give up in the face of discouragement. But God wants to train us to perseverance. He wants to train us to consistent, fervent prayer. And he promises that if we continue to trust and obey, our labor will not be in vain. Paul wrote, "Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up" (Gal. 6:9). We must keep rowing in faithful obedience to God's Word. A. W. Pink exhorts, "Dear

³ R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 196.

saint, whatever may be the path appointed by the Lord, however difficult and distasteful, continue therein, and in His own good time the Lord will deliver you.”⁴

A GROWING FAITH: WHAT THE DISCIPLES LEARNED

We remember that the apostle John wrote this Gospel many decades after the events, having had his own seat in this very boat. It would be wonderful to have seen the look on his face as he turned his mind back to that dark and stormy night. The lessons he learned, as intended by Jesus, would certainly have benefited his long ministry as an apostle. Surely, it was his heart’s desire that his readers should learn the same lessons from his account.

The first lesson has to do with one obvious question that must have afflicted the disciples as they were tossed in this great danger: Where was Jesus? Kent Hughes expresses the question vividly:

There were the disciples, battling the gale, wondering if they would make it to shore. The storm was raging. The waves were immense. The spray kept dashing over the ship. The masts had begun to crack, and water was sloshing in the dark hold of their beleaguered ship. The disciples probably wondered, “Has the Lord forgotten us?”⁵

For many, this nagging fear produces the worst affliction in our sorest trials: Has Christ abandoned me? Have I done something to depart from his will? Have I so shamed myself with sin that he has dropped me out of his hands? Probably the disciples’ worst trial that night was this: “and Jesus had not yet come to them” (Jn. 6:17). The sense of abandonment by God tempts some to anger and others to despair. But had Jesus forgotten them? Had he dropped them from his mind or gone off to pursue his own concerns? Where was Jesus?

The answer is that Jesus was up on the mountain watching his disciples (Jn. 6:15). They were under his caring eye the whole time, as he measured out the trials that would strengthen their faith. And what John merely implies is made explicit by Matthew and Mark (Mt. 14:24; Mk. 6:46): Jesus was praying. High up above the world’s

⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 309.

⁵ Hughes, 196.

raging power, high in a place of authority and communion with the heavenly Father, Jesus was watching and praying for them.

The same is true in the storms of your trials. You feel alone, and your circumstances suggest a lack of divine aid. Your former power has dwindled and perhaps your faith has grown dim. You think of giving up because you doubt the presence of the Lord. But where is Jesus during your trials? He is high above the heavens, at the right hand of God the Father, enthroned with authority and power. And he is looking upon you. He is lifting up nail-scarred hands, suffered for you, praying for you. Though the circumstances suggest that you may truly be lost, there is no real danger to your ultimate well-being.

There are Christians who wonder how the mortgage is going to be paid in weeks to come. Their career ambitions have advanced no faster than this little boat rowed straight into the wind. There are husbands or wives at the point of despair over their marriages, or parents bewildered by the hard-heartedness of their children. Some suffer under medical trials that suggest no end, and some face the prospect of death. How are such Christians to carry on in hope, much less in peace and joy, when God seems absent? Because Christ is watching you, with prayer for your deliverance, having already purchased your salvation with the coin of his own precious blood.

Second, we learn that Jesus comes to his people with help in need. John recalls, "When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat" (Jn. 6:19). It is one thing to have a savior who helps us from afar, like a benefactor who sends money or friend who writes an encouraging note. But how much more precious is one who comes to us in the midst of the storm, sharing our trial. There is no obstacle Jesus cannot cross to help us: not the sea, not the storm, and not even our sins.

This is why the incarnation is one of the great Christian doctrines. God the Son came personally into our world and suffered with us all the pains and afflictions of life. He knows firsthand what we are going through, having the compassion of shared experience. Indeed, Jesus suffered more, enduring the hatred of men and taking up the cross. Peter wrote, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3:18). Because of his fellow feeling and love, Jesus walked onto the

very sea and into the very storm in which the disciples were troubled. He promises the same to us: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior” (Isa. 43:2-3).

John says that when the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, “they were frightened” (Jn. 6:19). According to Matthew, they thought he was a ghost. In the darkness of the night and violence of the storm, their human frailty caused them to mistake what Jesus was doing. The same thing happens often to us: events start to unfold that Christ intends for us blessing, but in our confusion we pull away in fear. Notice that it was when Jesus spoke that they finally rejoiced, recognizing the familiar voice. “He said to them, ‘It is I; do not be afraid.’ Then they were glad to take him into the boat” (Jn. 6:20). It is the Word of God that achieves this for us today. It is by turning to our Bibles that our minds and hearts are steadied, all the more as we grow more familiar with the voice of Christ in Scripture. The way for Christians to know that Jesus is near and recognize his help is to direct our troubled souls to God’s Word. There, Jesus says to us: “It is I; do not be afraid” (Jn. 6:20).

A third lesson deals with the timing of Jesus’ appearance. Matthew tells us that it was “in the fourth watch of the night” (Mt. 14:25). That would be after 3:00 a.m., when the disciples had been rowing for hours and were most weary and dismayed. How often the Lord waits for the last extremity before arriving with aid. Many Christians can attest that it was just as the bill was due that the money arrived or just when the food ran out that a friend was sent to help. The lesson is never to give up, trusting the Lord to come at the right time of need. How often it is in the fourth watch that Jesus walks on the water to bring us aid.

Fourth, this miracle displays Christ’s power to overcome our problems. This is the fifth of John’s signs that prove the deity of Christ. Jesus could walk upon the stormy waves because he is their Lord and Maker; it was no more difficult for him to overcome the laws of nature than it was for him to write them in the beginning. With this same power he brought peace to the storm. Mark says, “He

got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased” (Mk. 6:51). Jesus has power to still the storm that rages against you and speak peace to your heart.

This shows that our greatest need is not to be preserved from earthly troubles, but to realize the divine majesty of our Lord and Savior, a truth we often neglect in sunnier days. This is how Christians learn to bless their trials for the lessons they have taught of God’s grace. Donald Grey Barnhouse remarks, “Our tears become crystal lenses through which He is magnified; and in the midst of suffering we realize the greatness of His power and the tenderness of His love.”⁶

It is clear that Jesus intended just this: a divine display to strengthen the disciples’ faith. In the Greek, Jesus identified himself not with the words, “It is I,” but he spoke the divine name given to Moses at the burning bush. “He said to them, ‘I am; be not afraid’” (Jn. 6:20). Just as the darkest sky best displays the glory of the stars, Jesus chooses the sorest trials to unveil his divine majesty to our eyes of faith.

John concludes, “And immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going” (Jn. 6:21). It is not clear if this speaks of another miracle that transported the boat, or if under Jesus’ watchful eye they had been safely guided to their destination all along. But we can be sure of this: the disciple of Christ, under his care, with him near at hand in time of need, is certain to arrive safely in the tranquil harbor of heaven. As Jesus was soon to teach, “And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day” (Jn. 6:39).

HOW TO HAVE JESUS AS YOUR SAVIOR

So far, I have directed my remarks to believers, who need to learn the lesson of Christ’s faithful care. But I want to conclude by addressing those who have yet come to Jesus. You, too, live in a dark and stormy world. You, too, are beset with troubles, or you soon will be. Are you sure you can survive them? Do you know the destination to which the journey of your life is leading? Let me tell

⁶ Donald Grey Barnhouse: *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,), 4:89

you briefly what you must do to be saved from the upheavals of this world and especially of the world to come.

First, you must admit your need. You, too, are pictured by the men in this battered boat, except that you have no reason to hope for salvation. Perhaps you have stored up money, or have attained influence or position. But how quickly a storm may sweep all these away. A visit to the doctor, a change in the stock market, or some other reversal of fortune may destroy all in which you have hoped. Most importantly, the reality of death will come to you and, standing on the brink of eternity, you will have to satisfy the judgment of a perfectly holy God. Do you really think you can do that in your own strength and on the merits of your true record? Have you not sinned, breaking God's law? Then you must admit your need for a Savior.

Second, you must believe the Word of God. You must believe what the Bible says about your sin and God's judgment. You must believe what the Bible says about Jesus, that he is God's unique Son who came to earth to save those who believe. You must accept Jesus' offer to place his righteousness around your shoulders and you must look in faith to his cross, where Jesus died for the forgiveness of sinners.

Third, you must commit your soul and your life to Jesus' care. This involves the surrender of your will and your willingness to follow where he commands, as the disciples did. You must place your eternal destiny into Jesus' hands and offer your life to his service.

Will you do this? Will you admit your sin, believe on Jesus Christ as your Savior, and commit your life into his keeping? If you will, it does not mean that the life ahead of you will be free from storms. But it does mean that Jesus will watch over you from heaven, that he will come to you with help in all your times of need, and that, by his almighty power, your life of faith will take you into an eternity of peace and joy and glory, to the praise of God's wonderful grace. If you will trust in Jesus, what the psalmist sang will be said of you:

I sought the Lord, and he answered me
and delivered me from all my fears...
Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him (Ps. 34:8).