WHEN THE STORMS OF LIFE ARE RAGING

The storms on Lake Galilee were known for two things - their suddenness and their severity. Without warning the calm, placid waters of what has been called “the most beautiful lake on earth” turned into a raging mass of whitecaps as the wind poured through the mountain passes in all directions, churning the tiny lake to its very depths. It was in just such a storm that Jesus walked through and brought peace to the wind and waves and to the terrified hearts of His disciples. But this miracle is more than a miracle; it is also a parable. It is not just the story of what Jesus DID years ago – that would have very little meaning for us – but it is the story of what He can and does do today. He comes to us in the storm and brings His peace.

The storms of life have much in common with the storms of Galilee, for they too are both sudden and severe. Without warning a great tragedy comes and rocks us to the depths. The telephone rings and we learn that our child is dead. The report comes back and we learn that we have cancer. The nurse’s face is drawn and we know that there is something wrong with our newborn baby. These and a thousand other terrible events burst into our lives without warning and threaten both our sanity and our Christianity.

Well, what can be done about it? If we were God, we would change Lake Galilee. It would be filled with white sails and surrounded by happy people and never troubled by any storm. We would also change this world. There would be no more germs, no more cancer cells, no more agony, and no more pain. But we are not God and we are not sure why He allows such a world to exist, although in our better moments we believe that somehow it is for the best and somehow it is the indirect result of humanity’s involvement in sin.
We are not God and even though we have done much to change this world, we are forced to continue living in a world where tragedy comes without warning. To deny this or to rebel against it only adds to our troubles. What we must do is learn to OVERCOME the awful effects of trouble. Once there was a little baby girl who became deaf, dumb and blind. If we had seen her our thought would have been that death would be a blessing. But that baby, named Helen Keller, grew up to say, “Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.” Our text shows us that we need to develop such an attitude.

I. THE FOUNDATION OF PRIOR PRAYER (6:46)

Our problem is that we wait until the storm comes to fight it. More than once we have been caught out in the middle of some churning lake with no apparent way out but down. We need some prior preparation. The storm windows of the soul should be installed before the storm comes. The deep foundations of character must be laid before the north wind rages against the walls. Jesus was a Man who walked through many a storm. He laid His earthly father in the grave. How many coffins did He build for His friends? He knew disappointment. He knew treachery. He knew suffering. He knew death. But He always walked with His head held high above the storm and His spirit unbowed. How? Verse forty-six gives us a hint – “After sending His disciples, He went up into the mountains to pray.”

When a storm hit Jesus it always found Him in possession of the prior reinforcement of prayer. Jesus built His spiritual strength through constant communion with God. The person who waits until he is in trouble to talk with God is asking for trouble. Jesus lived in the presence of God, and storm or no storm, He carried that presence with Him. He went through the agonies of many valleys, but these hard trips were prepared for in advance by His frequent trips to the mountains to pray.

The power of prayer to enable us to meet and conquer the storms of life can best be seen in the Gethsemane experience of our Lord. There, a few hours before the terrible ordeal of death by crucifixion,
and the even more terrible ordeal of bearing the punishment for the sins of all mankind, Jesus fell on His face in prayer. And so great was the trauma of that moment that blood poured from His skin life sweat. But He went out of the place to bear the cross and to win the crown. The Bible promises, “He will keep thee in perfect peace, whose heart is set on Thee.” No storm is too much when our eyes are lifted above the wind and waves to the face of our God and our hands, though wet with spray and calloused through rowing, are slipped into His.

II. THE REALIZATION OF PRESENT PROVIDENCE (6:45)

One fact that we overlook is that the disciples were on Lake Galilee because Jesus had sent them there (v. 45). It was because of their obedience to Him that they now found themselves fighting for their lives. Unlike Jonah, sometimes we are in our storms because we are in the will of God.

This passage will always have a special place in my heart because God used it once in one of those mysterious manifestations of His will that comes only once or twice in a lifetime. It was between my first and second year in seminary. I was very discouraged and on the verge of quitting the ministry. It seemed that I just could not get hold of anything solid to believe. I was bewildered by so many conflicting theological opinions and felt that a person so mixed up as myself had no right trying to preach to others. I had a long prayer about it and really felt that my confusions was a true sign that I had entered the ministry by mistake. When the next morning came, I started to pack my textbooks in boxes so I could sell them.

As I was packing a book of sermons by Charles Haddon Spurgeon on the miracles, I suddenly remembered that I had dreamed of Christ walking on the water the night before. I could not imagine why I had dreamed of such a strange and unpromising passage. I opened the book, and in the providence of God, opened it to that very sermon. His opening words literally leaped from the page. He noted that the disciples were on the lake at the command of Jesus and then applied their struggles TO THE STRUGGLES OF YOUNG PREACHERS who face doubt and intellectual conflict. Spurgeon went on to say that
this conflict was God’s way of instilling certainty. We stop relying on
the testimony of others and go to the Word of God and to our own
soul and to the Holy Spirit for guidance. I have found this to be true.

I took Spurgeon at his word and rededicated myself to the gospel
ministry. I have many faults, but one of them is not uncertainty in
fundamental convictions. I know what I believe and ten thousand
theologians with elaborate arguments cannot shake my confidence in
the Word of God and the testimony of the Holy Spirit to my own soul.
The Lord hurled a storm at me back then, and I’m glad He did.

III. WE NEED THE INSPIRATION OF PRESENCE (6:48)

A comforting fact here is that Jesus saw them all during the time
they were struggling. He watched them all night long. They thought
He had forgotten them, but he had not, His eye was forever on them
and it is forever on us. We can truthfully sing, “His eye is on the
sparrow and I know He watches me.”

One of the most bracing of all beliefs is that belief that somebody
cares. One preacher who received hundreds of suicide notes said they
all had one thing in common - the belief that nobody cares. The
message of Christianity is that God cares. When the storm lashes our
lives Satan’s first subtle remark is that our God has forgotten us. This
is why prayer is so vital. We can go to this God and find out if He
cares. We find out if he is there after all. The strange paradox of
suffering is that it very seldom leaves the committed Christian with
less faith. In most cases God is more real in the storm than anywhere
else.

As a pastor, I have walked into tragic situations with the fear that
the Christians involved would surely lose their faith and doubt the
love of God, only to find myself emerged in an atmosphere of faith
that those of us in the sunshine do not know. Jacob found God on a
stony pillow. Moses entered God’s presence on the backside of the
desert. David found the power of God in the shadow of a giant.
Joseph learned of God’s providence down in a pit. Paul learned
patience through a thorn. John saw the inside of heaven when exiled
on Patmos. Stephen saw Jesus while being stoned. No wonder then, that people submerged in trials so often say, “I was closer to God then than any other time in my life.”

IV. THE RECEPTION OF POWER (6:48-51)

When the storms of life are raging, we need most of all the strong hands of God. We need a Divine Savior who can march through the wind and waves and bring us the peace of heaven. All through this message, I have stressed the help that comes from the Human Jesus. He gives us an example of one who interprets suffering in light of the overall will of God. He is one who assures us that God cares. This is good! This is vital! But alone, it is not enough. We need more! We need the invasion of the Divine. We need a visit from on high. We need not just a hand reaching OUT but a hand reaching DOWN. When the storms of life are lashing out and all we can see are the wind and waves and while a thousand reasons tumble through our minds as to why we should throw away the idea that God is love, we need to know that “the eternal God is our refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms.” We know what the famous scientist, Paschal, meant when he said, “I would not be a Christian were it not for the miracles.”

Oddly enough, the Savior’s strong hands are often STRANGE HANDS. Jesus, the Divine Savior, came, but His coming was both delayed and unrecognized. Why did Jesus wait? Why did He watch them through the long night and then come as dawn was about to break? This is his usual method. When He heard that Lazarus was sick, He delayed going and by the time He got there Lazarus was dead and buried. In Acts 12, Simon Peter is placed in prison and faces certain death at the hands of Herod. The church went to its knees in intercession and we read that an angel of the Lord came and freed Him. But he did it “on the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward” (12:6). Why does God wait? Is it not so that we will put forward all of our best efforts, realize that the case is hopeless in our own strength, and then really see the power and glory of God when it comes. Doesn’t God hold back the dawn so that when it does come, we will cry, “To God be the glory, great things He hath done.”
And His coming was also unrecognized. He terrified the already frightened Apostolic band. They cried aloud because they thought He was a ghost (v.50) and calmed down only when He said, “Take heart, it is I, have no fear.” (V. 51)

I talked one day with a lady who said that she had lost her faith in God. The reason for it was that her mother, in her early fifties, had met sudden death. She said she could just not accept the injustice of this event. I tried to console her and said, “Well, at least you can be thankful that she did not have to linger and suffer.” The young girl replied, “Yes! Mother always prayed that God would spare her from suffering.” And then I said, “Well, the way I see it your mother’s death could well have been the answer to prayer.” Jesus had come! Jesus had answered a prayer. But he was unrecognized and brought only confusion and terror. O God, help us to brace ourselves for the storms. Help us to build our lives on the practice of prayer, the faith that all is well for the child of thine, the assurance that you care and the ability to see and know You when you come to take our hand. Amen!