

John 6:15-21

Lessons for Sailing Stormy Seas

And the sea arose by reason of a great wind that blew – v. 18

Have you ever noticed in your reading of the gospels how often you find an account of Christ crossing a stormy sea? This is the only account we have in John's gospel of a stormy sea adventure. But the same account that's given to us here is also given to us in Mt. 14. There's a very significant addition in that account which tells us how Peter walked on the water until he was distracted by the boisterous waves. Mark also records this event in the 6th chapter of his gospel.

What we have in these 3 gospels, however, is not the only account of the disciples crossing the stormy sea. This was something, you see, that they did more than once. So we have the account in Mt. 8 which is also recorded in Lk. 8 and in Mk. 4 of the disciples entering their ship and crossing the sea. The difference between this account and the ones we have in Jn. 6 and Mt. 14 and Mk. 6 is that in the case of our text in Jn. 6 we find Christ sending His disciples ahead while He stays behind and dismisses the multitude and then retires to pray.

There's something rather interesting to note in these accounts. In Jn. 6 we're only told that Christ retired to pray. In the cross references to this narrative we're told that Christ dismissed the multitudes. When you read in Jn. 6:15 how they wanted to take Christ by force to make Him their king, it makes you wonder how tough a time Christ had in the matter of dismissing those multitudes. He obviously succeeded and then *departed into a mountain alone* while His disciples entered their ship and went forth into what would become the stormy sea.

In the second account of Christ and His disciples crossing the stormy sea we find Christ with them in the boat from the outset of their launching out and when the storm arose and the disciples thought they were surely going to sink we find in that instance Christ asleep in the hinder part of the ship. You know the story – they awoke Him and said to Him *Master, carest thou not that we perish?* And in response to their state of panic Christ arises and rebukes the storm and the wind and their follows a great calm.

All told then – we have 6 instances throughout the gospels that speak to us of the disciples crossing stormy seas. These 6 instances record 2 different events so that each event is told by 3 of the gospel authors. And if you cared to expand the scope of your analysis you could add the Apostle Paul being shipwrecked in Acts 27 following a lengthy storm which led to all men on that ship despairing that they would ever be saved. According to 2Cor. 11:25 Paul suffered through and survived 3 shipwrecks. We only have the narrative account of one of them.

Why do you suppose that the Lord saw fit to include in His word so many accounts of stormy sea narratives? Could it be because the Lord knew, spiritually speaking, that stormy seas were going to be the portion of all Christ's followers?

We sometimes have mistaken notions about that don't we? And it seems that you can find popular television evangelists that will tell you that it's not suppose to be that way. Don't you know that when a sinner gets saved that sailing through life is suppose to be smooth? If your walk with the Lord is right then you should know nothing but smooth sailing and gentle breezes and if, for any reason, that's not what you're experiencing then you need to examine your hearts and confess your sins and look to the Lord for mercy. Isn't it interesting that that's exactly the approach that Job's friends took with Job? The explanation for his storms was sin in his life.

The Psalmist tells a different story, however. Listen to the Psalmist's words from Ps. 55:4ff *My heart is sore pained within me: and the terrors of death are fallen upon me. 5 Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, and horror hath overwhelmed me. 6 And I said, Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest. 7 Lo, then would I wander far off, and remain in the wilderness. Selah. 8 I would hasten my escape from the windy storm and tempest.*

You can see most clearly from these words of the Psalmist that there are spiritual counterparts to *the windy storm and tempest*. The windy storm and tempest stand for those times when the believer's heart is sore pained within him and the terrors of death fall upon him so that fearfulness and trembling become his portion and he finds himself overwhelmed.

So storms are very much a part of the believer's experience. So much so that Peter writes in 1Pet. 4:12 *Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you.* The storms of life are not strange. Indeed they're common and this may account for the reason that we find so many instances of stormy seas in the gospels.

The thing I'd like to consider this morning is simply this – what can we learn from the stormy seas that will enable us to deal with them the way we should? That's the question I'd like to answer this morning as we consider from our text:

Lessons for Sailing Stormy Seas

The first lesson I'd call your attention to is this:

I. Christ Sends His Followers into Stormy Seas

In vv. 16,17 we read: *And when even was now come, his disciples went down unto the sea, 17 And entered into a ship, and went over the sea toward Capernaum.* John states the matter very matter-of-factly. Matthew and Mark give us a fuller picture of this entry into a ship. Listen to Matthew's account from Mt. 14:22 *And straightway Jesus constrained his disciples to get into a ship, and to go before him unto the other side, while he sent the multitudes away.* The key word here and the word that Mark also uses is the word *constrained*. *And straightway Jesus constrained his disciples to get into a ship.* The word means literally *to compel*.

It would seem, then, that there was some reluctance on the part of the disciples to enter their ship and depart which necessitated their having to be constrained. A number of commentators suggest that the reason for the disciple's reluctance had to do with the desire of the crowd to make Jesus king. Perhaps the disciples themselves were swayed politically as the crowd was swayed and the best way to deliver them from such a notion was to send them away while Jesus Himself dismissed the crowd. At least one commentator, however, offers what I think is a better explanation and at the very least provides a distinct possibility as to why the disciples were reluctant.

Remember that these disciples were fishermen. They would have been familiar with the sea of Galilee and they no doubt would have gained a sense over the years of foreboding weather. Perhaps they could feel the kind of breeze that precedes a storm. Perhaps they could even see the storm clouds beginning to gather over the sea. Maybe there were already flashes of lighting and the sound of thunder and in that setting we find Christ constraining or compelling them to enter their ship and head toward Capernaum.

Whether or not the disciples could sense adverse weather, the Lord Jesus Himself certainly would know what kind of weather they would face. The storm could have been a complete surprise to the disciples but it would be no surprise to Jesus. He rules the weather; He rules the stormy seas. This narrative proves that to us. He's able to walk on the water and He's able at His word to bring the stormy seas to a halt. He's able to do these things because He's God. The wind and rain and the swelling waves do His bidding and yet here He is constraining His disciples to enter the ship.

And the point behind this all is that Christ directs His followers to do His will. I remember a preacher many years ago who preached on one of these passages that pertained to the stormy sea who said: *once Jesus told them to get in the boat and meet Him on the other side, it became God's will for them to do just that. And they had every assurance based on what Jesus said to them to realize that they would make it to the other side.*

I remember many years ago when I was a student at Bob Jones University, I had a very strong burden to get home for the holidays. One of the things that contributed to mightily to that burden was my desire to share the gospel with friends and family. It didn't seem possible, however, to make the trip from Greenville SC to Milwaukee, Wisconsin where my mother lived at the time. But then the Lord began to provide in unusual ways. The little Honda Civic I drove at the time was in need of maintenance especially for that long a trip and I was able by the Lord's gracious provision and through generous donors who didn't know anything about my burden, I was able to get that work done.

And then my Bible reading took me to Psalm 20. Psalm 20 is a benediction Psalm. It begins like this: *The LORD hear thee in the day of trouble; the name of the God of Jacob defend thee; 2 Send thee help from the sanctuary, and strengthen thee out of Zion; 3 Remember all thy offerings, and accept thy burnt sacrifice; Selah. 4 Grant thee according*

to thine own heart, and fulfill all thy counsel. 5 We will rejoice in thy salvation, and in the name of our God we will set up our banners: the LORD fulfill all thy petitions.

This Psalm was ministered to my heart so strongly by the Holy Spirit that I took it to be God's will that my little family head home over that holiday break season. Providence pointed in that direction. God's word pointed in that direction. The strong desires on my heart pointed in that direction. I believe the same thing could be said of me that was said of Paul and his associates in Acts 16 following that Macedonian vision.

Acts 16:10 *And after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavored to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them.* That phrase *assuredly gathering* is what I was able to do. And so we launched out to Wisconsin, not knowing that when we got as far as Remington, Indiana, we would hit a blizzard, a blizzard that would force us off the interstate and into a motel. We learned the next day that we were among the fortunate ones to be able to check into a motel. A number of motorists were being directed to a National Guard Armory and the next day the interstate was closed.

That was the beginning of what would prove to be a number of problems. The temperatures got so cold that the battery in my car froze so I had to get on a very long waiting list to have it jumped and when it was jumped the throttle linkage was frozen so that the car was stuck wide open. Well you can't let the engine run that way so I had to shut it off. We eventually had to have the car towed into a garage and after 30 minutes of a heated garage we were able to launch out again. But before we actually got to Milwaukee the alternator went out on the car and we needed to be rescued again.

It proved to be a real trial to my sanctification and yet I remain convinced to this day that I was following the Lord's will on that occasion. We did make it home and I was able to share the gospel especially with my grandmother on that occasion. And the lesson that was forcibly impressed on my heart that winter was that the Lord sends us into the storms. And the fact that Lord may through various providences and promises and desires reveal His will to you should never be taken to mean that you're going to necessarily sail over smooth seas with gentle breezes.

The Lord leads us in paths that make us prove Him. Wasn't that the case with the Israelites being led out of Egypt? They weren't led along the most direct or convenient route. They weren't led along the easiest route, but they were most definitely led by the Lord who would prove them and know their faith.

So don't be discouraged if you find the Lord leading you in a particular direction or to a particular vocation or to a particular field of service and you don't find the sailing to be smooth. The Lord sends us into the storms.

That's the first lesson, then, that pertains to sailing stormy seas. The Lord sends us into those storms. The next lesson is simply this:

II. The Lord Sees Us At All Times

You might not think this to be the case when you read in Jn. 6:16-18 *And when even was now come, his disciples went down unto the sea, 17 And entered into a ship, and went over the sea toward Capernaum. And it was now dark, and Jesus was not come to them. 18 And the sea arose by reason of a great wind that blew.*

Christ was not bodily with them and the darkness of night hid Christ from their view. And the sea rising by reason of a great wind certainly added to that phenomenon. What a sense of helplessness and despair they must have felt. They had launched out without Christ. And yet it was Christ that had insisted on their launching out without His bodily presence. It probably became easy for them as it often times becomes easy for us to second guess ourselves. Do you suppose they began to speculate between themselves as to whether or not Christ really sent them? *Did we understand Him right? Is this really what He told us to do? If this is really what He wanted us to do then why are we about to sink?*

These are the kinds of thoughts that believers have when faith gives way to doubts. And yet Mark gives us an added detail here that the other accounts don't tell us. Listen to the words of Mk. 6:45-48: *And straightway he constrained his disciples to get into the ship, and to go to the other side before unto Bethsaida, while he sent away the people. 46 And when he had sent them away, he departed into a mountain to pray. 47 And when even was come, the ship was in the midst of the sea, and he alone on the land. 48 And he saw them toiling in rowing.*

There's the added detail that the other gospel accounts leave out. It's the words of v. 48 *And he saw them toiling in rowing.* The fact that they couldn't see Him didn't mean that He couldn't see them. The night darkness and the stormy sea and the distance between them could hide their view of Him but it couldn't hide His view of them. He saw them. And not only did He see them but He could perceive their circumstances and the fact that they were toiling in their rowing. He could see their strenuous effort, in other words, to keep the ship afloat and to keep it moving toward Capernaum.

That's something you know that you and I can't do at times even when we're in very close proximity to another Christian. That Christian may appear to us to be fine. His physical appearance and demeanor may suggest that all is well. And yet all may not be well. Inwardly that Christian may be toiling in his rowing. He may be undergoing storms within his heart that you can't see and that he may not even know how to express.

And then there are times when we may be able to perceive some measure of that brother or sister's storm and yet we don't really know how strong that storm is raging. We might mistake their appearance and demeanor to mean that the storm is not really all that serious. This was the case with Job's friends. They could tell that he was sailing over stormy seas but when they endeavored to counsel and console him with their pat answers and shallow solutions he would respond to them by saying to them in effect – *you have no idea.*

I've always thought that anyone that engages in Christian counseling should devote himself to an in depth study of the book of Job. That book stands out as a perfect example of how misapplied counseling only makes matters worse and sinks a man even lower into

despair. When you hear a man say to you *you have no idea* you'd do better to admit the limits of your knowledge and experience rather than to assume you're wiser than what you really are.

But here's the thing – and this is the point you can make even when that Christian's storm is more than you can know – Jesus sees and Jesus knows and nothing you're experiencing is beyond Him. Just as certainly as *He saw them in their toiling in rowing* so does He see you and He sees me. And keep in mind that when Mark says in his gospel that Jesus saw them, that statement is given to us in the context of Jesus being in prayer. *He departed into a mountain to pray* we read two verses earlier in Mark 6:46.

Today we know that He's in prayer for us. These are wonderful Gospel words that Paul writes in Rom. 8:34: *Who [is] he that condemneth? [It is] Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.*

And in John 17 we're given a good view of what that intercession looks like. *I pray for them*, Christ says in v. 9. *I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine.* Do you see how Christ prays for His followers with a keen sense that they belong to Him and that they belong to His Father. *Keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are*, v. 11. The word *keep* means *to attend to carefully, to take care of, or to guard.*

Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth, Christ prays in v. 17. This accounts for the storms God sends us into. They're designed for our sanctification. They're designed to bring us forth as gold. *I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil*, Christ prays in v. 15. And this something very important to note because our desire very often is that we may escape the trials of this world. I cited Psalm 55 earlier. Verse 6: *And I said, Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest. 7 Lo, then would I wander far off, and remain in the wilderness. Selah. 8 I would hasten my escape from the windy storm and tempest.*

Could I suggest to you that when you find yourself in stormy seas, toiling in your rowing, wondering where Christ is and why He sent you into such a storm. Rather than pray for an escape from the storm, pray instead that Christ will come to you. That's the thing about each one of these accounts of the stormy seas. In each and every one of them Christ is with His disciples in the end.

Jn. 6:19 *So when they had rowed about five and twenty or thirty furlongs, they see Jesus walking on the sea, and drawing nigh unto the ship: and they were afraid. 20 But he saith unto them, It is I; be not afraid. 21 Then they willingly received him into the ship:*

Here is the best lesson you can learn for sailing through stormy seas. Jesus sees and Jesus comes. He doesn't initially command the storm to stop. He first crosses the stormy sea Himself and enters into our little boats. The lesson for stormy seas is that you should watch for Him, expect Him, pray that He'll come and receive Him into your ship, as it were.

The last lesson I want to call your attention is this:

III. Jesus Inevitably Brings Us to our Destination

Verse 21: *Then they willingly received him into the ship: and immediately the ship was at the land whither they went.* Matthew states it this way in Mt. 14:32 *And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased.*

And so they made it to their desired haven. I love the way the Psalmist expresses this whole episode in the words of Ps. 107:29-31 *He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. 30 Then are they glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them unto their desired haven. 31 Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!*

And this happens without fail. Jesus brings us safely through the storms of life. And ultimately Jesus lands us safely on heaven's shores. This is a part of His being our Surety, you know. The author of Hebrews writing with reference to the oath that made Jesus a High Priest after the order of Melchizedek says in Heb. 7:22 *By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament.*

By becoming the Surety for His people, Jesus took upon Himself the obligation to bring His people safely to heaven. That's what a surety is and that's what a surety does. He becomes the guarantor of the covenant promises. I know I've told you about the time when I worked in printing and there was a man who worked in that same print shop who was a rank Arminian. This man disturbed a number of professing Christians there by his assertions that a Christian could lose his salvation.

I'll never forget how a group of them – there were 2 or 3 of them who came to me and wanted my opinion on the matter of whether or not a Christian could lose his salvation. I said to them that whether or not a Christian could lose his salvation depended entirely on who was responsible for salvation. If the Christian himself is responsible for it, he not only can lose it but probably will lose it. If Christ is responsible for salvation, however, then we're safe. And the fact that Christ by an oath became the surety of a better testament means that Christ took to Himself the responsibility to bring His people safely to heaven.

Aren't you glad that Christ has taken that responsibility to Himself and not left it to us? Aren't you glad you're not left to yourself when the storms arise? Aren't you glad that you can see God's purpose in those storms even when they bring on swelling waves that can be frightening?

Don't ever think that the Christian life is suppose to be free from storms. Isaac Watts asks the question in one of his hymns:

Must I be carried to the skies On flowery beds of ease, While others fought to win the prize, And sailed through bloody seas? Are there no foes for me to face? Must I not stem the flood? Is this vile world a friend to grace, To help on to God? Sure I must fight, if I would reign; Increase my courage, Lord; I'll bear the toil, endure the pain, Supported by Thy Word.

So be assured, dear brother and sister in Christ that He knows about the storms. He endured them Himself. Indeed He endured storms the depths of which we can't begin to fathom by His atoning death. And on account of what He's endured and overcome He sends you into the storms.

But when he sends you into those storms, He doesn't lose sight of you. His eye is upon you, though the storms distract your sight of Him. He's paid too high a price for you to lose you, so you can be assured that He sees you and that He'll come to you. Make sure you seek Him and watch for Him and expect Him. Pray not for deliverance from that to which He sends you, but pray that you may have the faith to see Him crossing the stormy sea to be with you. And be assured that when He's with you all will be well and you will make it to safe haven.