

Who is in Control? Or, the Positive Power of Desperation (Mark 6:45-56)

Horatio G. Spafford was a successful businessman in Chicago in the late 1860s, heavily invested in real estate along the shores of Lake Michigan. The disastrous Chicago fire of 1871 wiped out his holdings. He immediately worked to rebuild the city and assist the many that were left homeless.

In 1873 he arranged to take his family to Europe. He was close to D.L. Moody and Ira Sankey and planned to attend their evangelistic meetings in England, then take a vacation. At the last minute, urgent business kept him home, but he sent his wife and four daughters ahead on the S.S. *Ville du Havre*, planning to soon follow.

The night of November 22, 1873, the *Ville du Havre*, was struck by an English iron sailing vessel, the *Lochearn*. The ship sank in 12 minutes. Of the 273 people on board, only 47 of them survived. Mrs. Spafford was found nearly unconscious, clinging to a piece of the wreckage. Their four daughters did not survive. When she reached Cardiff, Wales, she cabled home, "Saved alone, what shall I do?"

Grief-stricken, Horatio immediately started to Europe to join his wife. En route, the captain pointed out the place where he believed the *Ville du Havre* had gone down. Returning to his cabin, he wrote, "It is well; the will of God be done." He later wrote the hymn "It Is well, it is well with My soul", based on these words.

This evening I want us to discover some principles for surviving storms in life. Whether we do will depend on how we answer the question – who is in control? In Matthew's account we read of how Peter got out of the boat to walk on water like Jesus. In Mark's account, which we will limit ourselves to tonight, I want to concentrate on the context of this miracle, the significance of the miracle and the application of the miracle.

1. The Context: Christ followers will face storms

"Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶ After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray. ⁴⁷ When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. ⁴⁸ He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. (Mark 6:45-48)

Lets get the context for this passage. The disciples had just spent a day feeding 5,000 men (no telling how many women and children there were), and then had collected up all the uneaten food. And then Jesus tells the disciples to get in the boat and go to the other side alone while he would dismiss the crowd alone. The Greek word used here is very strong. The NIV says "Jesus made his disciples get into the boat" . The original is stronger – it means he literally 'forced' them into the boat. The verb can have the meaning of accomplishing something by force....but out of deeply-felt conviction. Significantly he compelled them to go without him. Don't you find that strange? Why would Jesus want to dismiss the crowds alone? And why send the disciples on ahead alone? Why? Every discipleship manual tells you that if you are going on a journey take someone with you so that it becomes a shared learning experience. So how was Jesus training the

disciples on this occasion? John gives us a clue. Remember this incident followed the feeding of the 5000. John tells us:

“After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.”¹⁵ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.” (John 6:14-15)

Why didn't Jesus want the disciples with him when he dismissed the crowds? Perhaps because he didn't want the disciples to get caught up in a popular uprising, in a revolution against Rome. His time had not yet come and so he wanted them out of there quick. They were to go one way and he would go another. There is a sense of urgency here. With hindsight, the night to come was going to provide an important lesson for the disciples, and one they would have to learn alone. For the next thing you know, along comes a storm. A serious storm. Notice:

Jesus sent them (Mark 6:45)

They were in this situation because of the will of God. When you are obeying Christ, no matter what happens, remember God doesn't make mistakes. Jesus sent them.

Jesus saw them (Mark 6:48)

He was on the lakeside, probably on the hill side and he could see them a few miles out struggling against the waves. He saw them.

Jesus sustained them (Mark 6:46)

While Jesus may not have been with them, he was praying for them. (Mark 6:46). What is Jesus doing now? *Hebrews tells us* “Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.” (Hebrews 7:25) He sent them, He saw them and He sustained them.

When you are serving God, and trying to obey Christ, you will have to face storms too. Not necessarily physical storms that are common in nature, but the storms of trials and difficulty. Even sitting here today, you may be going through a storm. Maybe it's money problems, or problems in a relationship. You might be having family problems, or problems at your job or school. We all have storms in life. Anyone who tells you Christianity is smooth sailing doesn't understand what the Bible teaches about serving the Lord.

Paul writes to Timothy, *“In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”* (2 Timothy 3:12). Sometimes Jesus compels us into the storms - those contrary winds that will teach, or condition or strengthen – and if he does, it is for our good. It is this thought alone that allows us to say with the apostle, *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”* (Romans 8:28).

The disciples were in a storm because they were trying to be obedient to Christ. And six hours of rowing later they had made little progress. But who was in control? Who was praying? Who was watching? Remember first of all, obedient Christ followers will face storms – despite the seeming absence of Christ, he is nevertheless in control. Not if, but when you also face storms,

2. The Significance: Recognize God's presence in storms

"Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them,⁴⁹ but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out,⁵⁰ because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid. (Mark 6:48-50)

This is the significance of the storm. Jesus wanted to be alone to pray, so they were sent ahead without him. To them it was no big deal – they used boats for fishing on a daily basis. But this huge storm blew in – bigger than most storms. Matthew says that the boat was "buffeted" by the waves. Mark says they were "in the middle of the lake" far from the safety of the shore... "straining at the oars, because the wind was against them." (Mark 6:47-48). John gives us quite specific information. A strong wind was blowing. The waves grew rough. They had rowed three or three and a half miles (John 6:18-19) It was so violent that the only thing the disciples could do was to keep the boat upright. I imagine... they wished the sides were a little higher and the wood a little thicker.

By 3:00 am the storm was getting really bad. By now they weren't worried about making it to the other side – they just wanted to stay alive. Let that sink in. The disciples were in distress. It is only then, after watching them for several hours, that Jesus acted. Mark says it was 'shortly before dawn, he went out to them" (Mark 6:48). Why now? Why not earlier? Because of the positive power of desperation. They had not got the point of the feeding of the 5000. Maybe they would get it now. Not when they were hungry but when they were terrified. Remember it's dark. There's a storm raging.

And Jesus comes to them walking on the water. What was Jesus up to, walking around on the lake at 3:00 am in the morning? Perhaps not surprisingly, the disciples were convinced he was a ghost, so terrified they cried out in fear. Apparently, popular Jewish superstition held that the appearance of spirits during the night brought disaster. So they may have feared this was an apparition of their imminent drowning. Probe with me a little today... Mark tells us that Jesus "intended to pass them by" on the water, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought it was a ghost.

"About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them" (Mark 6:48)

Why did Jesus want to "pass by them?" Did he want to race them? Did he want to impress them with a really neat trick? The verb "to pass by" (parerchomai) is a greek translation of the old testament "theophany." What is a theophany? It is those defining moments when God reveals himself on earth." God put Moses in a cleft in a rock so Moses could see God as his glory passed by. God told Elijah to stand on the mountain "for the lord is about to pass by." There is a pattern to these stories. In each case – God had to get people's attention... through a burning bush. Wind, fire, or... walking on water. In Scripture, "walking on water" is something only God can do.

"He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea...¹⁰ He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted.¹¹ When he passes me, I cannot see him; when he goes by, I cannot perceive him." (Job 9:8-11)

"This is what the LORD says— he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters" (Isaiah 43:16)

“Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made a road in the depths of the sea so that the redeemed might cross over?” (Isaiah 51:10)

No wonder they were terrified. Initially terrified that it might be a ghost (Mark 6:49). Then amazed it was Jesus (Mark 6:51). Mark leaves us in no doubt - this was a theophany. A divine appearance of God. Jesus own words were intended to reinforce this “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid” (Mark 6:50). That is something of an understatement. The English rendering “It is I” in Greek is ‘ego ami’ “I am” – the name of God. Jesus was saying “Take Courage because I Am. Don’t be afraid!” Jesus demonstrates the work of God and reveals himself, in the midst of the storm, with the name of God and in the Power of God – So when Jesus came to the disciples on the water He was revealing his divine presence and power. While they may not have grasped the significance of the feeding of the 5000, the storm has got their full attention. That is the positive power of desperation.

I believe that human extremity is a frequent meeting place with God. These are those divinely appointed defining moments that come into all of our lives. And... if you’re not looking for him, you just might miss him. Twelve disciples sat in the boat and we don’t know how the other eleven responded to that voice. Were they confused?

Did they respond with wonder? Disbelief? Or perhaps... a little of each! But one of them, Peter, asked Jesus to call him and in obedience, Peter got out of the boat. He felt safer with Jesus out of the boat than without Jesus in the boat. How about you? David felt something similar when he wrote, “Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.” (Psalm 84:10). Where would you rather dwell? Mark wants us to know that sometimes it takes eyes of faith to recognize when Jesus is around. When we are tormented by waves of disappointment and doubt, God may seem far away. At precisely that moment, remember, first it is the norm that Christ followers face storms. Secondly, when you face storms God is present with you.

3. Application: Trust God’s power to still the storms

⁵¹ Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, ⁵² for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened. ⁵³ “When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. ⁵⁴ As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. ⁵⁵ They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶ And wherever he went—into villages, towns or countryside—they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed.” (Mark 6:51-56)

When Jesus climbed into the boat the storm was stilled. John tells us “Immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.” (John 6:21).

Mark goes on “As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus.” (Mark 6:54). The disciples may not have recognised Jesus but Mark wants us to know that the crowds certainly did. Enough to know Jesus could heal and restore. The key verse in this section for me is verse 56. “All who touched him were healed” (Mark 6:56). It might take the disciples a few more miracles and one or two more sermons from Jesus to get it, but Mark

is impatient that we do. God is behind the storm...God understands your storm...God comes to you in your storm, and God alone can put the storm to rest if that is His will.

After the tragedy of losing their four daughters at sea, the Spaffords had two more children: a son, Horatio, born in 1876, and a daughter, Bertha, born two years later. Sadly, young Horatio contracted scarlet fever and died at the age of four. Then in August 1881, the Spaffords set out for Jerusalem as a party of 13 adults and 3 children and set up the American Colony. Colony members, later joined by Swedish Christians, engaged in philanthropic work amongst the people of Jerusalem regardless of their religious affiliation -- thereby gaining the trust of the local Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities. During and immediately after World War I, the American Colony played a critical role in supporting these communities through the great suffering and deprivations of the eastern front by running soup kitchens, hospitals, orphanages and other charitable ventures.

Today the work of the Spafford family continues, serving disabled children among the poorest families of Jerusalem.

Although Horatio Spafford in his hymn tells of the comfort that God gives, no matter the circumstance, he does not dwell on tragedy. In the third stanza he directs our attention on Christ's redemptive work on the cross, and in stanza four, anticipates His Second Coming. As we through faith understand these things, we too can say, "It is well with my soul."

1. When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
when sorrows like sea billows roll;
whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

2. Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
let this blest assurance control,
that Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
and hath shed his own blood for my soul.
it is well, it is well with my soul.

3. My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part but the whole,
is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!
it is well, it is well with my soul.

4. And, Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
the clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
the trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
even so, it is well with my soul.
it is well, it is well with my soul.

Who was in control on that night? Who is in control tonight? Is it well with your soul? We have seen something of the positive power of desperation. It took a storm to help the disciples get to the point of utter desperation and to recognise who Jesus Christ really is – the eternal Word, the Son of the Living God, the Saviour of the World.

The context? Christ followers face storms. The significance? When you face storms God is present with you. The application? God alone can still those storms. He did then. He does now. Lets pray.

Lord, in the storms of life, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardship as a pathway to maturity. Help me to trust that You will make all things right if I surrender to your will; so that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen.

The material about the Spafford family is taken from <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/americancolony/amcolony-family.html>

Other material is taken with thanks from www.sermoncentral.com