

Trusting Jesus through the storms

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[0 : 0 0] Now I discovered this week there is a passage in The Lord of the Rings that whenever Tolkien, the author, read it without fail, it made him weep. It's a point deep into the story when Frodo and Sam are in Mordor, they're drawing closer to the heart of evil. You read the story, you get the impression that all ordinary hope is gone. And this particular evening, Frodo is asleep. Sam is keeping watch, and in the darkness, something catches Sam's eye. And there Tolkien writes, there, peering among the cloud rack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end, the shadow was only a small and passing thing. There was light and high beauty forever beyond its reach.

And I would suggest that we come to a short passage like this one that we've just read in Matthew's Gospel. And it can do the same for our hearts that Tolkien experienced in that little phrase.

We are presented with a deep hope here in Matthew 8. We are presented with Jesus, not a twinkling star. We're presented with Jesus, the light of the world. That beacon of hope shining through the darkness that becomes for us hope for sinners and hope for sufferers. This high beauty that is beyond the reach of a dark shadow is none other than the eternal Son of God who has become one with us, to be present with us, to be present with his people in the storms of life, to overwhelm us with his power, with his compassion, with his glory.

And so as we ask again this evening, what kind of man is this? As we think about this remarkable section in Matthew chapter 8, we discover the real Jesus is the sovereign Lord with power over the forces of nature. We discover that Jesus is more wonderful than even his closest friends, suspected at this point. And he is for us one whose power and whose love we can trust in the storms of life.

And so we're going to walk through the passage very simply with four connecting statements. The first is this, that following Jesus may bring you into storms. Why the disciples out there that night in the darkness, as the waves are crashing, as their hope is fading, as their fear is rising. Verse 23, then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. They are there because of obedient faith. Jesus is their master. They are learners of him. They are following him. And that is what's brought them into the fury of this storm. If you remember, or if you look back just a few verses, Jesus in verse 20 has begun to speak to them of the cost of discipleship. And part of that is to lay aside comfort. The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. And here we find these obedient disciples pushed out of their comfort zones as they find themselves in the chaos of a storm. And it's important that we recognize this. We thought about it last week, but it's important that we recognize that following Jesus does not mean we become immune from life's troubles. Now we're very aware of that in our church, even this week, aren't we?

[4 : 1 7] We know of chronic and terminal illness. We know of deep pain and sorrow. We know that there are people struggling with work and with finance. There are those with worries for a spouse, for a parent, for a child. And we're reminded that ours is not an armchair faith, where everything becomes smooth and easy, but rather there's a fight for faith. And we also understand that following Jesus, while it brings the same kind of troubles that everyone else faces, it also brings additional kind of troubles, because it's only as we identify as one of Jesus' followers, perhaps, that we find ourselves being mocked and overlooked and sidelined. It's only those who make the costly sacrifice of dying to ourselves every day that we feel the cost and the pain of making Jesus Lord, submitting to his rule, is a denying self and carrying our crosses. There is the trouble that we face, the grief that we experience, the sorrow we know when people we love don't believe in Jesus, don't see any need for him or find their true hope in him.

And in so many ways, following Jesus can bring real trouble. And we shouldn't be surprised, because Jesus told us that. In this world, you will have troubles, he told his disciples. But remember, he also said, take heart, for I have overcome the world. So we shouldn't be surprised by troubles, and we should not despair. We should not by instinct say, well, God must have forgotten me. God must have abandoned me in this moment, because all of a sudden life has become hard.

Even as we turn to a story like this, think about Jesus. He is the man of faith. But where does he find himself? He too finds himself on these stormy seas. And more than that, Jesus will endure the storm of God's judgment for us in order to love and save us. That faith absolutely brought Jesus into storms.

And we are called to follow in his footsteps with the grace and strength that he provides, knowing that he walks there with us. But it's important to recognize that following Jesus may bring us into storms. Secondly, and it's here in our text, faith is often mixed with fear when storms come.

[6 : 58] So the furious storm has come up on the lake, the waves have swept over the boat, but Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, Lord, save us, we're going to drown. He replied, you have little faith. Why are you so afraid? So just picture the scene for a moment. Here they are out on a small boat with shallow sides. The storm clouds have gathered out of nowhere. Perhaps the rain has come. The wind is beginning to drive. The wind is whipping up the waves. The shallow boat is filling up with water. The waves continue to crash over the side. And added to that, remember the Jewish mindset that the sea is a force of chaos. And so there's a natural suspicion and fear of it. And their response is one of fear. But isn't that the natural human response to any terrifying or difficult situation? Here they are thrown into trouble. And it brings with it physical and emotional and spiritual fears. And I imagine we can all very easily relate to them and to that. And so in this moment we see fear, absolutely, but we also see faith. How do we see their faith? Because in this moment, they wake Jesus and they say, Lord, save us. It's a panic prayer. Jesus says they have little faith.

They don't fully understand the extent of his identity. But still it's that understanding. We have nowhere else to turn. But we turn to Jesus, trusting he is our Lord. And in some way, we trust that he can save us. That he can do something. Fear and faith are often mixed together.

The most common command in the Bible is the command, do not fear. Why is that? It's because God knows we will often be afraid. There are situations that will often cause fear and panic in our hearts.

So we've already seen that God does not remove hard situations from the Christian experience. But it's also important to see that God is not expecting that we will somehow become robotic and cease to have fear. But what he wants is for us to consider, what do we do next?

Where do we turn in that moment of dread and fear as it grips our heart? Do we turn to Jesus?

[9 : 55] Do we express faith, however small and weak? Look again at verse 26. You of little faith, why are you so afraid?

There is something that Jesus believes in that question. He believes that real faith in him can drive out real fear. In the moment for the disciples, it was as if fear was squeezing out their faith. But Jesus, the Son of God, says the opposite can also be true. Place your faith in me?

And that fear can become small. And in Psalm 56, we hear something of that same logic in the words of David.

In verse 3, we hear him say, when I am afraid, I put my trust in you. So he acknowledges fear, fear, and he calls himself to actively trust, to exercise faith. Fear is real, and so is the faith.

That's the positive side of things. I suppose often we find when we think about some of the great heroes of faith, we see their faith mixed with fear in the opposite way. Perhaps we think of Abraham and Isaac, great men of faith, but fearful in a foreign land, fearful of losing their wives, leads them to lie rather than trust God's provision and God's promise. We think about Moses, great faith, choosing to identify as one of God's people. But when God says, I'm going to send you to Pharaoh to lead my people out, he says, no, no, you can't be talking about me, send someone else.

[11 : 51] Think about Peter, his great confession of faith. You are the Christ, the son of the living God. Peter, whose faith would lead him to follow anywhere except when trouble comes, and when he's tested, he even denies knowing Jesus. Don't we discover so often in our experience that mixture of fear and faith in different ways? When we feel that weakness when trouble comes, what do we do?

We can learn from the disciples, I think. Faith cries out to Jesus, Lord, save me. Lord, I do believe. Help my unbelief. It's a daily prayer I think we need to pray. Lord, increase our faith that the fear of the Lord would be greater than our fear of any circumstance. So we would rejoice and tremble at the goodness and glory of our God to such an extent that that would dominate our thinking and our horizon. Faith is often mixed with fear when the storms come. And it's important to see how Jesus deals with the disciples in that moment. I love the way J.C. Ryle put it. He said, the Lord Jesus pities those he rebukes because he does deliver a rebuke. Your faith is small. They should have exercised greater faith than fear. But wonderfully, Jesus isn't done with them at that point. And nor is he done with us when our faith finds weakness. He doesn't wash his hands of them, nor does he wash his hands of any of us who believe in him. Instead, what does he do when they feel overwhelmed by fear rather than overwhelmed by faith? He shows them his glory again in a new way. We see his great power operating for their good. And in so doing, we see his great compassion towards them in their need. And we see the Savior that we are called to place our faith in.

You get that remarkable combination that here is Jesus in verse 24. The storm comes and he's sleeping. He is exhausted in the boat. He is truly human. He can sympathize with us in all our weakness, in all our troubles. But he's so powerful, he can exhaust the fury of a storm with just a word of rebuke.

And wonderfully, he's the same Savior who exhausts God's wrath against our sin on the cross. So that we can come to him in our fears, in our trouble, in our tears. That we too can pray, when I am afraid, I put my trust in you.

The third thing, and we've kind of alluded to it, is this. Christians have Jesus with us in the storms that we face. It's so basic and so important to notice that. Where is Jesus in this story? He is right there with his disciples. He has been leading them, and he is present for them in their troubles. And this story helps us to recognize in a new way, the disciples are seeing Jesus in a new way. Who is he? Well, he's truly human. He is exhausted. He experiences physical weakness, and he is truly God. Psalm 93, he is the Lord God who is greater than the storms and the seas. He is the God of Psalm 104, who operates to bring deliverance from the storm.

[16:01] And so we discover Jesus, our perfect mediator, the deep hope for God's church in stormy seas and stormy lives.

The one who guarantees that we will reach harbor safely, and that as we go through this journey of faith, Jesus, our captain, will be with us at all times.

One person who knew this truth was King David. I think that's one reason why the Psalms have always been a refuge for weary and troubled Christians. They have that unique capacity, don't they, to speak to our hearts, to speak to all circumstances. We know King David, a man after God's own heart, a man who received wonderful promises from God. He was told that one of his children, would rule and reign in the kingdom of God forever. He was a man of faith, and we see that. And yet, David in his life before becoming king, and as a king, he knew great suffering and trouble. A king who spent decades on the run from Saul trying to kill him. One who was hunted and hounded. One who faced rebellion from within his own household. One who knew mockery and rejection from his own people.

One who found himself making his home among the caves in fear of his life. In so many ways, we can see parallels with the great King Jesus. But to listen to those Psalms and to take those words on our lips and into our hearts, we recognize that they stir hope in us because they remind us of the reality of our God who is with us. Words like Psalm 23, verse 4, even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil for you are with me.

[18:02] Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. We heard Psalm 4. Psalm 4, which began, answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress. Have mercy on me and hear my prayer. It concludes, in peace I lie down and sleep. For you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.

We began with Psalm 61. Hear my cry, O God. Listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth, I call to you. I call as my heart grows faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

For you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the foe. And so when troubles come, and when grief comes, we go to words like these, or we claim the words and the promises of Jesus, I will never leave you. I am with you always to the end of the age. I will not leave you as orphans.

I will come to you. Now it is true that when we go through times of grief and trouble, we may not feel His presence. Like Mary at the tomb that first Easter Sunday morning, grief and tears may blur our vision and our ability to see our Savior, but God's Word cannot fail. God cannot lie. God must be true to Himself and His promises. And so we can sing with hope when darkness seems to hide His face.

I rest on His unchanging grace. We look to the one who faced Gethsemane for us and Calvary for us.

[20 : 05] The one who went and walked that road alone to save us. The one who is willing to go to the cross and know that sense of God forsaking Him in order that you and I, that we need never be alone.

And so faith trusts in Jesus. Faith rests in the fact that we are cemented to Jesus.

And that He never leaves us. And that He never leaves us, but He's come to us by His Spirit. And I think this is part of the power and the beauty of Christian testimony, isn't it?

To recognize that when we go through hard times, dark valleys of various kinds, we go there with our God and with our Savior. And we can give a testimony of real hope, of living hope, of eternal hope.

That Christians have a unique capacity to face darkness. Because we have Jesus, the light of the world, in our hearts. There is a stability and a peace that can mark the Christian in times of deep grief and sorrow.

[21 : 22] That speaks to a watching world. As faith points to Jesus and His grace that helps us through. One last thing to say by way of conclusion and application, I guess, faith learns to look to Jesus in our storms.

Verse 27 is a wonderful picture of the life of the disciples. Remember, they're not new to Jesus. They haven't just encountered Him that afternoon. They've been with Jesus for a time. They have been learning from Him. They've listened to Him as He taught the Sermon on the Mount. They've been watching Him do miracles.

They thought they knew Him. They thought they knew how wonderful He was. And now they're discovering He's even better. He's even more glorious, even more powerful, even more good. And so that question, what kind of man is this, is a question full of awe and wonder and worship. As they recognize the one with them in the boat, in the storm, is the Lord of creation who is over the storm.

[22 : 40] They discover that the Master who has bid them come follow me and count the cost is the Messiah, the Son of God, who is more than able to save.

And so in the boat, they're discovering and discovering again, Jesus is the Lord they can trust. It's the life of discipleship.

Discovering again and again that our God is good, that His Word can be trusted, that Jesus is the Savior we need, that He is able to bring peace and grace and compassion to still the storms of our troubled hearts and lives.

And so faith looks to Him and rests in Him. And so this story gives an encouragement and an invitation to us if we find ourselves in trouble, or if this moment is a time of calm, a preparation for trouble, to come to Christ in faith, to submit to Him as Lord, to know Him as that friend that will stick closer than any brother.

And this is what gives the Christian deep hope. Because it's a hope that's not grounded in self. It's not saying, here's the hardships, I better roll up my sleeves and grip my teeth and get through it and see what happens, come what may.

[24 : 11] Faith is anchored in the eternal Son of God. One who is full of power and authority, one who came to defeat the forces of evil, the one who came as God with us, and God for us at the cross, to be God in us by His Spirit.

That no storm could ever overcome this Messiah, because He was a man on a mission. And His rescue mission lay beyond this storm.

It would take Him to His sacrificial death on the cross, and the triumph of His resurrection. And because of that victory, by faith in Jesus, we can live secure, knowing that no storm, no trouble, no grief, can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

and we can know that our troubles don't ever draw us away from Jesus' heart. Instead, those troubles that we face, they draw Jesus' heart towards us.

He is a good and a kind Savior. He is a good