

No One Like Jesus: Stormy Skies
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 107:23-32; Acts 18:9-11; Matthew 8:23-27

Our final Scripture reading today is from Matthew 8:23-27. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy word. "Then [Jesus] got into the boat and his disciples followed him. Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves 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 of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!""

Trains have always been a part of our family. The railroad tracks were right across the street from the condo where I grew up. My uncle was a railroad enthusiast who owned a large model train set – and I had a small one myself. Catha's great-grandfather worked in a trainyard as an interpreter. We lived near a train during seminary, and now one passes right by our house. I love the sound of a train, riding on a train.

But trains are also powerful and potentially dangerous. My mom had a very close call with a train. Catha's great-grandfather eventually died in a railyard accident. The very first thing I learned as a child living where we did was, "Don't play on the tracks." Even now, I get a little twinge when I drive over the tracks somewhere.

The world has been revolutionized by trains. The world's smaller because of them; we get our food and freight far easier; modern metropolises rely on them. They are a modern marvel. But if we ignore their immense power, we can find ourselves in danger because of them.

Today's passage reminds us of many of the same things on a far larger scale, only we're not dealing with trains or planes or automobiles but the very power of God. When we understand what we've read today, we have a better understanding of what it means to truly fear the Lord and to rely on His power in the midst of life's challenges.

As we left off last week, the disciples were preparing the boat while Jesus addressed two would-be followers. Now they are on their journey, and Jesus takes the down time to rest. But in the midst of their trip, a terrible storm appears. It still happens today on the Sea of Galilee; fierce gales sometimes come out of nowhere. This was likely not the first time the fishermen in the group had experienced something like this.

But they are terrified. They were conditioned to be. The Jewish people saw open water as frightening. The abyss to the Jews was not necessarily a deep underground tomb like in other ancient Near Eastern cultures – it could mean the depths of the sea. Israel was one of the only nations with a large coastline that didn't have a navy; the only time one was recorded was in Solomon's day nearly a thousand years before Jesus, and they learned naval matters from the Phoenicians. Fear of the seas is the likely reason why. And while fishermen had to go out on the waters to do their business, if you fear the sea, you're probably not going to learn to swim.

In the midst of all this fury, this gale, Jesus is asleep. We know what it means to be dead tired, but how can Jesus sleep through this? Why aren't the waves waking Him up? Jesus sleeps soundly because of His relationship with His Father. A storm is not going to take precedence over the Father's will. Jesus knows that the appearance of calamity does not make it certain.

But the disciples panic. They wake up Jesus saying, "Save us, Lord!" And here's the real kicker – they're despondent. The exact wording in the Greek is, "We are perishing!" It's not the future event of "we're going to drown" so much as it is, "death is upon us!" They are freaked out! This storm is awful – fishermen like Peter who had been doing this all their lives had seen plenty of storms in the past. This one takes the cake.

So Jesus wakes up, and He says to them, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" This is funny because my first thought is, they have great faith! They turn to Jesus for salvation! They turn to Jesus in their time of need. They believe He is the only one who can rescue them. That seems like faith to me. Doesn't it to you?

So why does Jesus rebuke them? It's not because they doubt that He has powers or that He's blessed by God; they've seen that for themselves. It's because they haven't fully trusted themselves to Him as the Son of God who has control over every situation. He's healed many, He's cast out demons, He's done amazing things...but can He do *this*? They've never seen Him control nature before, so there's doubt. They don't yet have the faith to realize that *nothing* happens outside the realm of God's control – or the Son's control.

We sometimes do this too. We don't doubt that Jesus worked in *that* situation over there, or that He worked those miracles way back in some *other* time, but we fear that *this* time, things will be different. That while God came through for *other* people in *other* places and *other* times, He can't or won't come through for me in *this* place and *this* time. And it's *that* place that Jesus kindly but firmly rebukes us, asking us, "Why do you doubt?"

Jesus gets up, says a word of rebuke to the storm, and a great calm settles over the lake. Immediately, everything settles down. Everybody's sitting around looking at each other. This great calm is not the relaxation that comes after battling through stormy seas when things get a little better. This is a great calm brought by God Himself, where the waters of terror suddenly become a sea of unmoving glass.

The disciples are beside themselves. They are flabbergasted. This story shows up in Mark and Luke too – in Mark, they're said to be terrified, and in Luke, it says they are amazed and terrified at the same time. Everybody's in a kind of awestruck shock. They ask, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!" Their comments show their lack of understanding as to the depths of who Jesus is, but it also recognizes their amazement and distress when they begin to understand. They begin to see that Jesus is no ordinary man at all. They are starting to grasp that this is the King of Kings walking with them. Which is scarier: the killer storm or the man who can stop it with a word?

That brings out the first side of what God is saying to us today through this passage: *the proper fear of God is a good and blessed thing*. We don't talk about the fear of God much because we so misunderstand it. When I was younger, I couldn't possibly see how fearing God could be helpful. But it's all over the Old Testament.

Deuteronomy 10:12-13: "Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the LORD'S commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good?" Or how about Proverbs 9:10 and Psalm 111:10, which both say the exact same thing? "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom."

We typically fear things that might harm us, things that are evil and we want to avoid. As a teen reading the Bible, I wondered, "How can I fear this God who wants to be close to me? The bullies at school, I want to get away from them. What good does fear do? Is God really out to get me, to destroy me, if I make one false move?"

Of course, my younger self was wrong. The fear of God is healthy respect for the immensity of His power that shows in our actions. God's power knows no ends. We fear Him not because He is evil or that He has the intention of harming us. We fear Him because He is so far beyond us, so much more perfect and holy and righteous and good. We fear God because His goodness points out our deficiencies – our lack of mercy and justice and grace towards others. That God wants to approach us despite our sin and weakness is a good thing for us; it means that when we believe and trust in Him, we won't be condemned. But just like the disciples, we should be awestruck to be in the presence of the One who made worlds beyond number.

Just like the train analogy, yet at a far greater level, God is good. What He accomplishes is fantastic for us, and it's far better than getting us from point A to point B or hauling stuff around the country for us. Through His power, He gives us all good things and accomplishes our salvation – through His power, His Son is raised to life after His death, after His sacrifice to cover our sins. By God's power, the wicked will not forever prevail; by His power, justice and righteousness and peace will flow, and when they do even now, it's a sign of His power.

One key difference between trains and God is that God never gets off the tracks. He doesn't run off the rails going too fast due to some error somewhere. His ways are always consistent – if you will, He always runs the same route over the same tracks the same way. You can know that He's coming and count on Him with the precision of a Swiss railway. And you can even get on that train – the old analogy from the spirituals was to "get on the gospel train." Anyone can get on board God's train through faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

But here's the other part of it. Scripture shows us the tracks. We know what it is to please God – to trust in His Son – and we know what it is to sin – to rebel against God and to follow our own ways. We either board the train or we play on the tracks. We either decide to rest securely on that 400,000 pound locomotive or we stand in front of it going 50 miles an hour. If you have no fear of God, you're going to wind up on those tracks. But if we get onto the gospel train, the power of God is working for us, not against us, blessing us.

So let's shift gears and talk about that side of what the passage is saying to us: *God has the power to stop the raging storm in our lives – in His timing.* The disciples didn't know Jesus could stop the storm. They ask Him to save them, but I'm not sure what they were hoping for...a painless trip to heaven? Assurance that if they paddled fast enough, somehow they'd make it back to shore? I'm not sure if they knew either. All they knew was that Jesus was their last hope.

And He comes through. Though they've never seen Jesus calm a storm, that's precisely what He does. And He'll do many more unexpected things throughout His ministry, impossible things – raising the dead, feeding the masses, even withering a fig tree. Jesus' power has no bounds.

The thing that seems to bother the Apostles is Jesus' timing. They seem perturbed that Jesus is sleeping in the midst of this raging nightmare storm. Surely He could have told the wind and the waves to be quiet throughout their whole trip, right? Then they wouldn't have had to wake Him! But His power was shown in the midst of the storm, not in its absence. This isn't the only point at which Jesus' timing gives them grief – He heals on the Sabbath, which angers the religious leaders and gives them fuel for their fires against Him. The Apostles love what Jesus can do, but they aren't thrilled about *when* He does what He does.

Do we trust that Jesus has the power to stop the raging storms? Sometimes we do and sometimes we don't. It's harder to give an answer in the midst of the crisis than outside of it. It is much easier to believe when things are rosy than when they're not. We say we trust God, but we often don't put that to the test every day. Just like the disciples, we know He's powerful, but is He going to come through in *our* storm?

I can tell you with confidence that God can and God will, as God sees best fit. God rescues a people of Egypt, brings them into a promised land, and keeps them there for over a thousand years while all the other nations around them falter – despite never having the military resources the nations around them have. God constantly delivers individuals from death – whether saving King David from Saul or the prophet Elijah from the wrath of Jezebel. He gives women beyond childbearing age children. He provides manna in the desert for His people when there is nothing to eat. The story of Scripture is one rescue after another, God providing for His faithful.

God will come through. There is no doubt. Don't let your situation, your problem, your burden, make you think that God will not come through for you. In the very best way possible, you're not special. Nothing has happened to you that God looks at and says, "Gee whiz, I hadn't thought of that." O you of little faith, why do you doubt, Jesus asks?

Haven't you seen what He's done? Haven't you seen the answered prayers? Aren't people here today with us, alive, who by all rights should be dead if not for God's intervention? I've been in hospitals and nursing homes with some of you for things that could have killed you. Our car accident a few years ago could have killed us. We've faced unemployment and underemployment together. Yet God still makes a way.

We might ask, why do we have to go through the storms in the first place? Why doesn't God just stop the storm from happening? Why shouldn't we get that as a bonus for being His people? The simple fact is, when there are no storms, we lose the fear of God. In the book of Judges, for four hundred years, God's people got into a pattern. They forgot God. Then a storm came – some local nation oppressed them. They cried out to God in their distress and God sent them a judge, a deliverer, to end the tyranny against them. They followed God as long as the judge lived. Then once they died, same old, same old...they forgot about God until the next calamity.

God wants us to turn to Him in every trial. Not every trial is there to get our attention; suffering, Scripture says, comes for many reasons, ultimately to glorify God. But if God gets our attention in the trial, all the better. The very best thing we can do is to keep close to God at all times – praying to Him, reading His Word, serving others in His name. That way, when trials come, we won't be as anxious about them because we intimately know the one who can deliver us from them.

And that leads to my final thought today: *don't focus on the storm so much as you focus on the Savior*. The disciples are so freaked out by the squall that they forget about Jesus. At the last minute, they're like, "AAAH! The storm is raging and the boat is swamped with water and we're all gonna die and oh no...oh wait, Jesus is in the boat!" Their focus is so taken with the horror in front of them that they forget about the Savior who's with them.

When we face a hard situation – whether it's your body that's failing in some way or bills that can't be paid or a family disagreement that gets worse – we naturally gravitate to thinking about that hard situation all the time. It consumes our thoughts. The more we try not to think about it, the more we do. It's a vicious circle. And to be fair, we need to think about some of our dilemmas. Some of our dilemmas come from not planning beforehand. But many, we have very little control over, just as the disciples had no control over the storm.

But if we focus on the Savior rather than the storm, we become assured of our victory. When we focus on Jesus, we are reminded from Romans 8:37 that "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." We have the assurance of Philippians 4:12-13 from Paul: "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength." We can say with 2 Timothy 4:18, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

Friends, let this passage remind us that our God is awesome and powerful beyond all comprehension – worthy of being feared in the very best way. Know that God can still the very real and disastrous problems in your life with a word. Then put your passion and energy not in stressing about the obstacles in your path, but in growing in godliness...and you will see Jesus take care of your stormy skies.