

MASTERY IN THE STORM

Matthew 14:22-33

Early one morning our Lord called His disciples to go apart with Him into the desert to get some rest. Christ was then at the peak of His popularity. Wherever He went large crowds gathered around Him and to them He broke the bread of life. Through that day He was busy preaching and teaching.

As the day was drawing to a close, the Saviour was moved to satisfy the hunger of the great throng, so He performed the miracle of feeding the five thousand men, besides the women and children, from the five barley loaves and the two fishes. The effect of that miracle was immediate and immense. The people were simply amazed by it. They had never seen anything like that. They became wild with enthusiasm and resolved that they would proclaim Him their king. People like to enthrone those who give them something. Multitudes always want to honor those who furnish them easy bread. Our Lord had come to establish a kingdom, but He was not a cheap politician who was willing to bribe people with a crust of bread. Christ did not come to make life easy, but to make men good.

Determined to thwart the purpose of the multitudes to make Him their king, and knowing that even His disciples were about to be swept along with the thinking of the crowd, in order to give the disciples a chance to regain their balance, our Lord instructed them to get in a boat immediately and make straight for the opposite side of the Sea of Galilee.

The Sea of Galilee is sacred in the annals and memories of Christian faith and affection for all time. The devout student of gospel history from distant lands counts it a memorable moment in his life when, with throbbing heart and perhaps tearful eyes, he first looks down from the neighboring hills upon its glassy waves and silent shores. Thinking faster than he can utter his thoughts, he thinks, "Here was the earthly home and the heavenly work of the incarnate Son of God. Along this shining beach He walked in the light of the early morning. These lowly sands bore the impress of His feet, and these banks echoed to the sound of His voice. Many times He was borne across from shore to shore in the fisherman's boat."

Christ sent the disciples away. Of their own volition they would not have chosen to set out on their journey that night. To them it seemed to be a purposeless venture. He also sent the multitudes away. People like to go where the crowds are. They like to let the crowd control their thinking. Individual responsibility is always a burden to bear. To shift the load to the crowd is much easier. We also like the approval of the crowd. But there come times when it is necessary to forget what is popular and to think of what God's will is for us.

After our Lord had told His disciples to go across the Sea of Galilee, and had sent the throngs of people to their homes for the night, He turned His steps up the mountain slope in order to spend some time alone in prayer to the Heavenly Father.

I. Faith's Vision.

Two things occupied the minds of the disciples that night.

1. The severity of the storm.

When the disciples started on their journey across the sea that night the wind was soft and gentle, the sea was calm, the sky was clear and the stars

soon began to shine. After they had been on the water a short while, a great change had taken place. Where all was calm a while ago, now all was tumult and confusion. The night had become very dark, the wind was whistling in their ears and the boisterous waves were tossing their little boat like an empty shell upon the water. The disciples were discouraged and almost despondent as they diligently rowed their boat on the storm-tossed sea, but without making any progress.

Life has its storms also. Like the start of the disciples that night, the beginning of life's voyage is generally calm and with favorable winds, but ere long the gentle winds will change to contrary ones. Storms often come while we are in the pathway of duty. Contrary winds smite the body, the mind and the spirit — winds of sickness, fear, discouragement, sorrow and remorse. But, however contrary the wind may be, it can never blow without God's permission.

The disciples were conscious of the severity of the storm. Was there ever such a time of storm and stress in our world as now? On the canvas of the world scene clouds of darkness seem to fill the skies, and there is an icy chill of fear in the wind. The life of the nations is as storm-tossed as the waters of blue Galilee that dark night. The very same question of survival itself is thrusting up its ugly head.

On the narrower scene of personal faith and experience, the individual Christian also is only too aware of the severity of the storm. Seldom, if ever before, has the sense of conflict been so acute, or the sense of battle so vivid. Materialism beats in upon the soul. Moral standards everywhere are reaching a new low level. Wickedness and evil seem rampant. National aspirations add their disturbing and conflicting currents to the whole picture. The storm seems at its height.

2. The serenity of the Saviour.

These strong men, accustomed to the oars and not easily frightened by the waves, toiled hard for nine hours, trying to reach the point where they hoped to take their Master on board, but it was all in vain. While the merciless storm was still at its height and the sea continued to rage under the lash of the winds, the depressed disciples began to wonder if they would ever make it through the fury of the storm and reach the other shore. They wondered why Christ had led them into this difficult and depressing situation, which they were not able to handle. Their strength simply was not sufficient to carry them where they wanted to go.

From the mountainside Christ watched them in what appeared to be one of the worst storms which had swept over that body of water and knew their thoughts. He watched and waited until they were fully aware of their need of Him. As long as people are sufficient within themselves, they do not have any time or place for Christ. It is certainly encouraging to note that, even though Christ had been on the mountain, He had not forgotten His struggling disciples and was not unmindful of the storm which had overtaken them.

Sometime between three o'clock and dawn, when their energies were at their lowest, and when it was easiest for them to yield to fear and despair, Christ came to them, "walking on the sea." Christ is ever ready to come to the assistance of His own the very moment they need Him most.

"Just when I need Him, Jesus is near;
Just when I falter, just when I fear,
Ready to help me, ready to cheer,
Just when I need Him most:
Jesus is near to comfort and cheer,
Just when I need Him most."

Faith's vision sees more than the storm. It sees the Saviour in the very midst of the tempest, undismayed and unafraid. Across the tossing and turbulent waves moved this serene and regnant figure. If panic had already begun to seize the minds of the disciples, then, in staggering and amazing contrast, peace and serenity seemed to rest upon that kingly form as it moved toward them out of the night. Even so, when the storms of temptation, difficulty, adversity and sorrow beat upon our lives, Christ moves with a mastery that startles and staggers our minds. He never assigns a hard service to any of His followers and then leaves him to struggle unsupported and alone.

In the midst of the awful struggle through which they were passing, the disciples beheld a strange sight, namely, a figure coming toward them on the water. It was a novel sight which met their gaze. When they saw the form in the distance, they began to wonder if it was a human or a spirit. They thought it might be a messenger from the spirit world, coming to warn them that they would soon be with the departed. Their first reaction to this unique spectacle was one of fear. When they saw Christ walking toward them on the sea, they cried out in fear, thinking He might be a ghost coming to do them harm. Frequently in our troubles God's providence appears to us something other than it really is.

II. Faith's Venture.

Through the storm, across the waters, out of the night came the voice with which the disciples were familiar, saying, "Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid." Before the other disciples sensed who it was walking toward them on the water, Peter became convinced that it was none other than Jesus Himself. So, in his accustomed impulsiveness, Peter exclaimed, "Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water." This shows us that one mark of faith is that it always desires to be like Christ.

It had not occurred to Peter that there were two ways of crossing from one side of the sea to the other. Likewise, most Christians today do not realize that there are two ways of crossing the waves of this stormy life — the way of human effort and the way of faith. There is a vast difference between these two ways.

1. The mastery faith seeks to share.

"Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water." What was in the mind of Peter at that moment? Was it just the thrill of a new experience, to be able to say that he had done it? I don't think so. Surely it was that there was something about Christ in the setting of the storm that drew the heart of this man like a magnet — Christ's power and mastery of the waves. That quality of mastery in the life of Christ still stings at the hearts of men, causing them to want to live as He lived, and to experience His victory, joy and peace.

2. The authority faith needs to have.

"And Jesus said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus." Peter had the good sense and spiritual

discernment to know that while the whole situation, and his own aspiration, lay beyond the reach of his pitiful resources, obviously they were not beyond the resources of the Master. He wanted to know if Christ was willing for him to share this experience and to know this mastery. The answer came in the word "Come." Faith must be rooted and grounded in the word and will of God.

As evidence to indicate that mastery in the storm is God's intention for the Christian, and that serenity is something that the child of God is meant to know, we have such statements in the New Testament as the following: "Sin shall not have dominion over you;" "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us:" and "My grace is sufficient for thee."

III. Faith's Victory.

When Christ said, "Come," Peter stepped over the side of the boat into the sea and walked on it. What a picture of triumphant faith that is! When Peter walked on the water, he proved the victorious power of the word of the Lord. The way of obedience is always the superb way. There is nothing comparable to it. There is no greater blessedness than that of simple obedience to Christ. Obedience is a condition of the transfer of power from the Lord to His disciples. Let us ever remember that if the Lord commands us to step out into the storm, He will always provide the protection and the power that are necessary for us.

1. Faith's victory had its moments of danger.

When Peter looked away from the Saviour to the storm he began to sink. The moment of danger was the moment of distraction; the moment when his gaze was diverted from Christ. It matters little what it is that distracts us, what does matter is the fact that we are distracted from Him. How easily, and how often, this does happen; and how disastrous the results! This sinking man is a picture of much that we see in our modern world. It is a description of some of us, who are not living as victoriously as we did formerly. While we may not have surrendered completely, we are not actually getting anywhere. Some have even quit trying.

Peter became so wind-conscious and wave-conscious that he ceased to be Christ-conscious. Our distraction may be our circumstances, our temptations or our problems. Ours is perhaps the most problem-conscious age in history. We see our individual problems with bewildering clearness. We also have a keen realization of our church problems, our social problems, our educational problems, our national problems and our international problems. To know our problems is good, but to be obsessed by them is an evidence of tragic weakness.

When Peter saw that he was sinking, he frankly faced the fact and admitted it. He prayed the simple, direct and pointed prayer, "Lord, save me." If you have a sense of defeat, do as Peter did. Take your gaze off your own weaknesses, follies and failures and fix it on Christ. Fix your gaze on His sufficiency, His love, His wisdom and His power.

2. Faith's victory had its miracle of deliverance.

"And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt? And when they were come to the ship, the wind ceased." Peter went on looking into the

face of the One to Whom he was linked and by Whom he was sustained. Together they shared the experience of mastery in the storm as they moved across the waters. Whether your sea be that of disappointment, sickness, suffering, temptation, loneliness or sorrow, you can walk on it, with the Lord's help, if you will.