

“OH, THE STORMS OF LIFE!”

Jonah 1:1-16, Matthew 8:23-27, Acts 27:13-26

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In his book, *The God You're Looking For* (Thomas Nelson, 1997), Pastor Bill Hybels shares this account; “When I was first learning how to sail my dad's sailboat out on Lake Michigan, he would often say to me, ‘Go ahead and take the boat out, but take a friend with you.’ A 42-foot sailboat on a body of water the size of Lake Michigan is a big responsibility. But always up for a challenge, I'd find a junior high friend to accompany me, and we'd sail past the breakwater, hoist the sails, and head out to open water. But as soon as I'd see any cloud formation coming our way or the wind seemed to be piping up, I'd head back towards shore, take the sails down, and regain my normal breathing pattern only when we were safely tied up in the slip. Most of the time, it was fun having a friend along, but in a storm I knew this kid wouldn't be much help.

“Other times, however, my dad would come home from work and we'd go out together. When I was sailing with my dad, I'd actually look for cloud formations and hope for heavy air. I loved the feel of the strong winds and huge waves!

“My dad had sailed across the Atlantic Ocean. He had endured five days of sailing through a hurricane. He was a veteran, and I was confident that he would be able to handle anything Lake Michigan could throw at us. Everything changed when my dad was on board.”¹

Storms in life are inevitable. We live in a broken world, devastated by sin with the consequence of death. No matter what age we are, in our journey here on this earth, we are guaranteed to have difficult times that cause us hardship, worry, struggle, and maybe extreme anxiety. Some of the storms will be small, easy to handle on our own. Others will turn our lives up-side-down and may cause us to think that we're all done with no hope left at all. It happens

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002] pg. 109)

today just as we've seen that in our Scripture lessons today.

Jonah faced the storm of choosing to obey God's call in his life to go to Nineveh with the word of warning of God's impending doom. The Ninevites were enemies of Israel, so Jonah basically said, "Heck, no! They deserve everything that God's got planned for them. Why should I go and save my enemies?" But when God calls a person into His service, it's not usually an option for that person to vacate the premises and go in the opposite direction.

So a great storm was put before the ship he was sailing on, away from Nineveh, and it got Jonah's attention. But instead of repenting right away, Jonah decided he should take his own life rather than reach out to the enemy. He told the men to throw him overboard, because the storm was his fault. But God had bigger plans for Jonah, and for the Ninevites. And when the sailors threw Jonah overboard, the sea grew still and they all "*greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to Him*" (Jonah 1:16). Then God saved Jonah and used him to save the whole city of Nineveh. The storm turned Jonah's life around for God's good.

Likewise, we have the account of the disciples crossing the Galilean Sea with Jesus. They were hit by a huge storm, too, and even though some of the men were experienced sailors as fishermen, having navigated the Sea most of their lives, they now feared for their safety. The storm was so violent, that the disciples called out to Jesus for help as a last resort. Here they were, thinking they were going to drown as their boat took on water, and they forgot who Jesus was. All they knew was that the storm had gotten way out of their control, so they resorted to awakening Him, maybe even handing Him a bucket to help them bail out the boat.

But Jesus did much more than that - He called the men out on their lack of faith and then "*He got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm*" (Matthew 8:26). Jesus' immediate calming of that storm, brought the disciples to realize just who Jesus was and is

- the Savior of the world who has complete control of all things - even the storms that we face in our lives.

Storms are much easier to endure and navigate if we have a seasoned sailor with us. Bill Hybels had his father to trust in order to find support and encouragement when sailing out on Lake Michigan. The years of sailing experience in Bill's father gave him the know-how of what to do in the event of a major blow up of wind, even in a hurricane. It gave Bill courage to face the storms, knowing he had someone with experience with him to guide him back into safety.

But other storms wracked Bill Hybels' life later on, and those storms were much greater than the ones on Lake Michigan. Bill turned to a greater help than his earthly father during those times of tumult and strife. He relied upon Jesus to guide him and direct him so that he could continue his journey here on the earth and do his best as a servant of Jesus.

The same thing is true for each one of us. As we are going through our lives, we will have storms come our way, and if we're unsure how to deal with those storms, we tend to retreat into the safety of the harbor. We sometimes shrink back into our old ways of the world or trust our own sources of encouragement rather than turning to the Lord Jesus for help. But as we turn to Jesus in order to endure the storms in our lives, we come to build experience in trusting Jesus so that the storms of life don't hold us up or restrict our ways. Sailors gain experience as they endure the storms around them. Good sailors are made as they navigate the storms of the lakes or oceans of the world. Christians grow in assurance as they turn to Jesus during the storms of life and find His help and guidance

So, ultimately, our help is in the Lord Jesus. When the storms of life become so great - even hurricane force - our only hope is in trusting Jesus to guide us and protect us. There is no other person here on this earth that can save us! But when we trust in Jesus with our whole heart

and our whole life, He steps in to bring calm and peace to us in the midst of that storm.

But there are times when storms are necessary in order to help others see the value of having Christ Jesus as Lord of their lives. These storms may come at the most inopportune times for us, but they are meant to build out trust in the Lord Jesus, AND to give others a chance to see the need for Jesus in their lives, too.

That's where we find Paul as we come near to the end of our study of the Book of Acts. Just 3 more weeks! Paul is on his way to Rome aboard an Alexandrians ship headed toward port in Italy. Listen to the storm he and the others aboard that ship had to endure. This is Acts 27:13-26. (READ Acts 27:13-26)

The captain of the ship, the owner of the vessel, and the Centurion, Julius, had all disregarded Paul's warning of eminent disaster as they chose to leave the harbor of Fair Havens on Crete and sail on toward Phoenix (Acts 27:8-12). When "*a gentle south wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete*" (27:13). But that's when everything broke loose and a hurricane attacked them.

Typically, the prevailing winds blow towards the southeast, just like they do here in the United States. But wind patterns often present themselves differently that might cause us to think that we can do what we have planned. But these south winds that Paul experienced, were only the beginning of a huge storm called a Northeaster. It changed the direction of the winds 90 degrees, from southeast to southwest, and blew the ship way off course toward the shallow waters of Syrtis, off the coast of Africa. The winds were so violent, the sailors used sea anchors to try to slow their progress and keep the ship upright. There was no way that they could navigate, so all they could do was to wait out the storm and pray for safety.

Now, if you've ever been in a situation like that, you know that no one remains an atheist.

As the saying goes, “there are no atheists in fox holes,” so there are no atheists on board a ship that is caught in a hurricane. All 276 men aboard that ship were praying. Even the most experienced sailor was afraid of this storm. They did their best to keep the ship in one piece, throwing the cargo overboard, and even the ship’s tackle and navigation equipment, and then wrapping the hull with ropes to keep it from splitting apart. Life was completely out of their control. Yet there was hope.

And the same is true for each person in life today. The things that tend to knock us down or cause us the most troubles are where we learn how to live in this world and navigate to successful living. When everything looked its darkest, Paul addressed the whole company on board that ship, encouraging them to eat, saying “*an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, stood beside me and said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you’*” (27:23-24).

Even in the middle of a terrible storm, Paul took the time to share his faith with those around him. When everything else failed, and all looked hopeless, he shared how the Lord God Almighty still knew what was happening, and cared enough about them to grant them protection. That’s the hope we have in Jesus! When we have faith in Him, we are not alone. Listen to this account.

“Evangelist Aberra Wata worked with Christian youth in the southern part of Ethiopia during the time of Communist rule (1974-1991). He reported the following story to fellow missionary John Cumbers:

“Word came from the commandant that the Party leaders had studied my report about the work among the Christian young people. The authorities decided I had to be executed because of my ‘treasonous’ words.

“The only way you can overturn this sentence,’ said the commandant, ‘is for you to deny that you are one of the believers.’

“What could I say? I told the commandant, ‘If they execute me, I will be immediately with the Lord.’ The commandant replied, ‘That's what I expected you to say.’

“As I awaited execution in prison, my Savior gave me songs to sing I had never heard before. He turned me into a composer. [My fellow prisoners and I] reveled in the joys of praise to our God. The guards kept trying to silence us, but with the threat of execution hanging over us, why should we keep quiet? Seven men had come to Christ in that prison, and we all sang together.

“One particular guard took delight in mocking us, yelling at us, and insulting us. He would put filthy words to the tunes we sang. One night he patted his revolver and promised, ‘Tomorrow morning at this time you won't be in the land of the living.’

“Just after midnight that evening a tremendous storm burst on the town and the prison. Huge hailstones fell, wrecking several roofs, including the one where the insulting guard was sleeping. He became terrified, pulled out his revolver, and shot at random into the darkness, using up all the bullets he had promised would finish us off the next day.

“One by one the roofs were taken off the commandant's house and the offices of the chief judge, the administrator, and his deputy. The prisoners in cells three, four, and five got a soaking from the rain too. We were in cell one and were kept dry. There were a lot of wet and unhappy people in Yavello that night.

“At nine o'clock the next morning, while expecting the cruel guard to fulfill his promise to shoot us, we observed a remarkable sight. That same guard was pushed into our cell, without his uniform, by the commandant, who was whipping him with his belt. Other people

in the background were yelling, ‘We told this man to leave the believers alone, but he refused, and so God has sent this terrible punishment on the town and prison. He deserves to be given some of his own medicine.’

“After some time the guard was released and given back his uniform. He told us, "I know that the Lord was with you. I know the way I should have treated you, but Satan persuaded me otherwise. Please forgive me.’ We did, and several more men came to Christ in the prison.”²

The storms in life can become opportunities for us to demonstrate our faith in Jesus, and who knows who will be affected. It might be that the very storms that we think will ruin or destroy us will be used to transform the lives of many others. Throughout the storms, however, we must keep our faith and trust in Jesus. He is the one who has called us.

One last word of encouragement from the life of a missionary of the Lord Jesus.

It begins, “My heart is sunk. . . . It seemed to me I should never have any success among the Indians. My soul was weary of my life; I longed for death, beyond measure.’

“So wrote David Brainerd, describing his early weeks as a missionary to Native Americans at the beginning of the 1700’s. Things didn't improve much for the first two years, in fact. He felt his prospects of winning converts ‘as dark as midnight.’

“Three years into the work, though, he finally witnessed a revival among the Indians of Crossweesung in New England, and after another year and a half, the number of converts numbered 150 - not much by today's mass evangelistic standards, but profoundly significant in his day. Unfortunately, Brainerd died after only five years on the mission field, at age 29.

“After Brainerd's death, Jonathan Edwards - whom some consider America's greatest

² (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003] pg. 63)

Theologian - published Brainerd's journals. These were read widely in America and Europe. In fact, William Carey, the 'father of modern missions,' the man who ignited the modern Protestant missionary movement, which has been responsible for millions upon millions of conversions worldwide, pointed to Brainerd's journals as a key source of his inspiration to take up the missionary life.

"Who, then, can judge whether our work is worthwhile? Certainly we cannot when we're in the midst of discouragement."³ Maybe the way we respond to the storms we are forced to endure will bring about encouragement to those around us, or those who hear of our faithfulness to Jesus. The key is for us to remain faithful to the One who has it all under His control (Matt. 28:18), the One who can make all things new (Rev. 21:5), and the One who can work all things together for good (Rom 8:28), if we remain faithful in our love and devotion to Jesus Christ.

Let's pray. Father, thank You for the gift of life for each one of us. Thank You for Your Son, Jesus, who made it possible for us to have eternal life with You. Thank You for our faith in Him as our Savior and Lord. Thank you for the storms in our lives that take us beyond ourselves, forcing us to trust in Your complete authority and power. Give us the courage to face each storm with confidence that you know right where we are, and You know exactly what we are going through at those times. Thank You that as we turn to You during those storms of life, we can find relief, and even joy, confident that You will use us in just the right way to bring honor and glory to You. Help us to be faithful in all we do and say. Help us keep our complete devotion to You, and not turn aside to follow the wiles and temptations of Satan. Give us strong witnesses of faith for all those around us to see and become encouraged by, in the great Name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. AMEN.

³ (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003] pg. 264-265)