

Rough Seas, Mighty Savior

In October of 1991 a storm developed layer by layer over the northeastern United States and Canada until it turned into what came to be called “The Perfect Storm.” It was amazingly powerful and destructive and received its name from the unusual combination of two strong weather fronts and a hurricane converging at the same time. It would later become the title of a book by Sebastian Junger and a movie starring George Clooney (1997 and 2000, respectively). From the standpoint of the crew of the fishing boat, the Andrea Gale, everything that could go wrong did go wrong, and they were all lost at sea. From a purely meteorological perspective, each layer of weather that was added created the perfect storm.

But the adjective “perfect” implies a goal toward which a development was intended. Although God undoubtedly was sovereign over that 1991 storm as He is over all storms, we do not know in our frail humanity how He is using the natural disasters of a fallen world that has been “subjected to futility” (Romans 8:20) to work good for our planet. In the case of the storm described in John 6:16-21 (and also Matthew 14:22 and Mark 6:45-52) we do know how God intended to use it for the training of Christian disciples. We know it because John tells us how in this text. That we are to identify with the disciples in this incident is clear from “his disciples” being the subject of the topical sentence of the paragraph. In verses 16-19 we see “Layers” of the storm, and in verses 20-21 we see “Lessons” that make it perfect.

John 6:16-21

16 “When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, **17** got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. **18** The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. **19** When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. **20** But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” **21** Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.

I. Layers (vv. 16-19)

- A. When darkness is upon you (John 6:16; cf. Gen. 1:2; John 1:4-9)
- B. When the sea is all around you (John 6:16, 19; cf. Job 38:8-11; Ps. 29:3-4; 93:3-4; 107:23-30)
- C. When fellow followers are with you (John 6:16-17; “in the same boat;” archaeologists have unearthed a 2,000 year-old Galilean fishing boat on the northwestern shore of the lake. It could hold 15 people; it was 26.5 feet long, 7.5’ wide, and 4.5’ deep). Our Lord never intended for us to follow Him all by ourselves. He wanted us to be part of bands of disciples, following Him in boats and not in one-person kayaks! We learn best together. And when Jesus is not with you! (6:17; Mark 6:45, 48). Jesus made the disciples go on ahead of Him, but Mark tells us He could see them from the mountain where He was praying. When we think He doesn’t care about the trials we are facing, we forget that He is always watching and that He is always protecting and loving.
- D. When the wind is against you (John 6:18, “strong” wind; Mark 6:48; Matthew 14:27, “the wind was against them”).
- E. When the waves are above you (John 6:18 says “rough,” Mark 6:48 describes their headway as “painful,” and Matthew 14:24 adds that they were “beaten by the waves”).
- F. When fatigue is in you (they had rowed 3-4 miles into a fierce head wind with jarring waves, John 6:19; it was between 3:00 and 6:00am, Mark 6:48; and the disciples had been tired even before the long day of teaching that had culminated in the feeding of the 5,000, Mark 6:31).

- G. And when Jesus is passing near you (John 6:19; and translate Mark 6:48 as “pass near” rather than “pass by” because 6:48 says that Jesus was aware of their plight).

II. Lessons (vv. 20-21)

- A. Then take Him into your boat (John 6:21)
- B. Then believe in Him (John 20:30-31—this walking on water miracle is the fifth of seven “signs” John records in his gospel. He knows there are many more signs that Jesus did, but he says he chose these so that readers would “believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” Matthew 14:33 says that the miracle had that exact effect on the 12, in that they called him “the Son of God” and worshipped Him.)
- C. Then don’t harden your hearts (as the disciples did after the feeding of the 5,000, failing to capture the significance of the miracle, according to Mark 6:52).
- D. And don’t be afraid (John 6:20; Matthew 14:26; Mark 6:49-50)!

When the perfect storm explodes all around you, look for Jesus passing near you, take Him into your boat, and do not be afraid!

Discussion Questions

- (Ice-breaker) Tell us the most powerful storm you have ever seen.
- (6:16-19) Which do you think is the most frightening aspect of the storms of life we encounter as we try to follow Jesus: the darkness upon us; sea (i.e., chaos) all around us; wind against us; waves above us; or fatigue within us? Why?
- (6:16-19) Why do you think that Jesus chose to walk on the water of the sea in that situation so that just the 12 disciples would see Him? Why not do it in public in broad daylight?
- (6:19-20) Can you understand how one of your neighbors, co-workers, fellow students, friends, or family members might not believe that Jesus really walked on water? What would you say to try to make it more sensible to them?

5. (6:17) Who is in the boat with you as you go through the storms of life that are our lot in Christian discipleship? Do you think Jesus wants you to get into a bigger or smaller boat in order to experience deeper fellowship with fellow disciples?

6. (6:20-21) Which of the lessons from this storm and the miracle that happened in it do you need most in your life right now: to realize that it is Jesus coming near you in the storm and to take Him into your boat (John 6:20-21); to believe in Him and worship Him (John 20:30-31; Matthew 14:33); not to harden your heart against miracles and Jesus' power to do anything and fix any situation (Mark 6:52); or not to be afraid (John 6:20; Matthew 14:27; Mark 6:50)?