

# Through the Storms

Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32, Matthew 8:18-34

January 9, 2000

One summer Sunday afternoon, nine years ago, I had to drive over 100 miles from Concord, North Carolina, up to Camp Grier, a Presbyterian church camp located in the mountains near Old Fort. Then, of course, I had to turn around and drive back home again. On the way back down the mountains I came through a couple of terrific thunderstorms. By then I was running late, and I wanted to drive faster than I should have under those conditions. But I could not drive any faster, because there was always somebody in front of me going slower than I wanted to go! At first this made me mad. But soon I had a strong sensation, which I have felt on many similar occasions: God must have put those slow drivers in front of me for my protection, to prevent me from driving as fast as I wanted to go and to protect me from the consequences of driving as fast as I wanted to go. That may sound funny to you, but I am convinced of the truth of it. Part of what convinced me was the I half-dozen wrecks I saw that afternoon. There were single car spin outs, multiple vehicle collisions, and a jack-knifed truck. Thanks to the grace of God, exercised primarily that afternoon, so far as I could tell, through the presence of slow drivers, I reached home safely.

Part of what this reminds me of is that God does not always prevent the storms of life, but he does see us through the storms that come. God does not always prevent disease or injury from befalling us, though I am sure that he does many more times than we realize . Moreover, when disease or injury does come to us, God does not abandon us to it, but instead he always accompanies us through it. This is important to know. I am not saying God always prevents wrecks and accidents, for Christians or for anyone else. For instance, there was the time twenty-one years ago, in Truxillo, Virginia, that I turned over a dump truck with a full load of gravel. And I do not mean some little dump truck. It was a big dump truck. But that is another story. The point here is that God sees us through the storms of life, especially the big storms, the storms we cannot handle on our own, the storms that leave us crying out for our Lord and Savior. And finally, when death comes, as it does to us all, we find that we are not alone there, either. God in Jesus Christ has gone before us even there. He never asks us to do what he has not done himself. And God will carry us home safe through that final storm, too.

In today's reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, we have a series of responses to the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and these responses go from bad to

worse. In many ways these are stories of what the disciples of Jesus Christ should not be. Of course, that is valuable information, too. We can learn from that. At the same time, despite these various bad responses, there is a tremendous consistency to the lordship, the grace, the mercy, the goodness, and the helpfulness of Jesus Christ. He does not respond in kind, but remains forever Lord. He seeks great faith but accepts little faith. He seeks courage but accepts cowardice. He would have us be true disciples but takes us, initially, just as we are. What is important, finally, is the grace and power of God. That is what we are supposed to believe in. We are not to have faith in faith. We are not to save ourselves by our own strength. We are, however, to approach God by approaching Jesus Christ with at least some inkling of trust, some seeds of confidence, in his goodness and power.

First, then, Jesus calls us to follow him. No, we cannot physically walk around behind him the way they did then, but we can follow him. We can believe in him. We can worship the God and Father he reveals to us. We can obey him. We can serve him. Jesus is calling you and me, today, to follow him. Consider the two individuals besides Jesus in the first part of today's reading. One is an enthusiastic volunteer. The other is a hesitant follower. One comes from the great crowds surrounding Jesus. The other comes from that smaller group known as his disciples. Jesus turns the enthusiastic volunteer away, while he encourages the hesitant follower.

The enthusiastic volunteer is a scribe. He was a scholar, a lawyer, and a professor of law, which then was to say also a teacher of the Bible. He thought too well of himself, calling Jesus a fellow teacher but failing to acknowledge him as Lord. The scribe seems to have thought he was doing Jesus a big favor by volunteering. He simply announced, he did not ask but simply announced, "I will follow you." He probably was not acquainted with hard labor or difficult living conditions. Jesus describes to him the circumstances under which he lives. So we learn to consider the hardships and count the cost as we consider our discipleship. As Calvin says of this passage, we must deny ourselves and take up our crosses. There is nothing wrong with enthusiasm, if we know what we are getting into. The scribe apparently did not. This is not the kind of follower that Jesus needs.

The hesitant person, on the other hand, is already a disciple. But he wanted to wait. He preferred being a disciple later instead of sooner. His father was elderly, maybe. He did not want to desert him in his old age. "Let me complete my duty to my father," he was saying, "and after he dies, then I will follow you." The answer of Jesus is strong: "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead." Jesus is not condemning burials. The point here is that duty to God comes first. The demands of discipleship come even before the high duty that we owe to parents. This does not mean that he asks all Christians to leave their parents. But it does

mean that all Christians need to be ready to serve Christ as their highest priority. If Christ calls us away from home, we must be prepared to follow. While the enthusiastic volunteer received discouragement, this hesitant disciple received strong encouragement. Jesus urged him, "Follow me!"

In the second part of today's reading, the scene shifts from land to sea. It was at the beginning of the first part that Jesus gave the command to cross the Sea of Galilee. At the beginning of this second part, they actually get into the boat. Note also the contrast between who is involved. In the first, Jesus is surrounded by "great crowds." In this second part, "his disciples followed him." This is a dividing point. Great enthusiastic crowds come to listen. Only the disciples follow and obey. The scribe said he would follow Jesus wherever he went. The disciples actually did this by getting in the boat. Jesus told the hesitant disciple, "Follow me!" This second section shows us the disciples doing exactly that.

This story functions on a couple of levels. It tells us what Jesus and his disciples did. It also tells us how we can follow. As the disciples were drawn out of the great crowds, so are Christians today drawn out of the general population. As they banded together, so do we. The disciples on the boat give us an image of Christians in the church. For centuries, the boat has been a symbol of the church. The church carries us safe through the seas and storms of this life. Finally it lands us on the far shore of eternal life. We can believe in Jesus. We can worship the God and Father he reveals to us, and we can obey and serve him. We cannot do this alone. There is no individual or private Christianity. We follow by following together. We read the scripture together. We listen to the word of God together. We obey and serve together. The calling of Jesus Christ for us to follow is fulfilled in the life of the church.

Of course, not everything goes smoothly in the story or in the church. A great storm arose. The waves were swamping the boat. Jesus was peacefully sleeping. The disciples fell into a panic. The storm tested their faith, and they were found lacking. The storms of life test our faith, as individuals and as a church. Every adversity is an occasion for trusting or distrusting God. The point here is that God acts through Christ to preserve the boat and the disciples. So today God acts to preserve the church and the followers of Christ. The church does not belong to us, but to God. God calls us to serve in the church, and God uses our service. But we know that we cannot cause the church to grow by one member by any power of our own. Only God can preserve and increase the church. We are also aware of God's mercy and protection in our own lives. That is what I was talking about happening during my Sunday afternoon drive to and from the church camp. Just as Jesus quieted the sea and the storm, Jesus protects us today as we follow him. He never

says there will be no storms! He does say that he will not desert us. He promises that we will not perish. He will carry us through the storms.

Consider now the third part of today's reading. Jesus and his disciples had left Jewish territory and crossed over into Gentile territory. There Jesus healed two screaming demoniacs, living among the tombs, the walking dead. Several things there are interesting here. The demons knew exactly who Jesus was, even though others did not know. They called him "Son of God." But their knowing was not helpful to them, because they were not faithful or obedient. Knowing by itself is not enough. We are called to believe, to follow, and to obey.

The second interesting point is that Jesus sent the demons into a herd of swine. The herd was destroyed. The demons were destroyed. Jesus Christ is strong to save, and in his strong presence the powers and forces of evil are exorcized, defeated, and destroyed. Here he did it with one effortless word, "Go." As Martin Luther wrote of Satan, in "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," "one little word shall fell him." Since Jews considered pigs unclean, this was a good Jewish joke: the demons and the swine deserved each other!

Afterward, it was not so funny. While two men were healed, the town lost its herd of swine. They would rather have left matters the way they were. So "all the city came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their neighborhood." It is bad enough for others not to follow. This is outright rejection. There is fear and resistance to the gospel. There is fear and resistance to the healing that Jesus Christ brings. The human community would prefer to keep a few people visibly sick and have them to blame things on than to have them healed.

This story stands as a warning to the church. There is always the danger that the church will beg Jesus to leave the church so we can keep things the way we like them. It is easier to exclude than to forgive. It is easier to nurse our wounds and kindle our hate than to open our arms and hearts and love each other. Matthew tells us this story partly so we can hear Jesus asking us today how much we welcome him into the church that bears his name and how much we would prefer he kept his distance. There is something else going on here, too. This story is not only a warning to the church but also a warning for the church. When we are faithful, when we do follow Jesus, when we do tell his good news and offer his healing in the world, there will always be those who reject that message and us as the messengers who bring it. This should never surprise us, overwhelm us, or undo us. As they did to Christ before us, so will they do to us who try to follow him.

This is the word of God to us today from the Gospel according to Matthew. Jesus Christ calls us to follow him. This involves making Jesus Christ our number one top priority. It means abandoning other sources of security, meaning, and purpose in our lives. We are to rely on Christ alone. Moreover, following Jesus

today means getting on board with Christ and therefore getting on board in Christ's church. Christ will carry us safe through the storms that are bound to come. Are we ready to follow and to obey? Are we willing to face the hardships and to endure the rigors? Can we set aside our hesitations and excuses so we can embrace Christ's gracious command and invitation? Can we see God's faithful presence in all events and circumstances? Can we guard against the possibility of our own rejection of Christ within ourselves, and can we at the same time be prepared to suffer rejection from others for his sake? Jesus calls us to follow. The boat is leaving. Will we turn away and try to live life on our own? Or will we get on board with Jesus and his church, and face the storms of life under his care?

*To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.*

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor  
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
1627 Monument Avenue  
Richmond, Virginia 23220  
[www.grace-covenant.org](http://www.grace-covenant.org)