

Placing Our Focus on Jesus in Times of Suffering

In this new series of articles from John 6:16-21 we're seeking to answer the oft asked question, "How could a good God allow so much suffering in the world." We're approaching this question from the perspective that, for Christians, one of the primary reasons that God allows suffering is in order to grow us to be more like Christ. I noted last time that suffering *alone* is not the path to spiritual growth. We want to *rightly respond* in times of suffering in ways that show that we're seeking to place our trust in God no matter what we're going through. We saw last time that this event of the storm at sea that's recorded in John's gospel is also given in Matthew and Mark. Let's pick up some further information from Mark's gospel.

"And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea and [Jesus] was alone on the land." (Mark 6:47). Notice now what we're told in verse 18 of our passage in John: "The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing." At this point, allow me to point out the biblical truth that the "sea" in a number of places in scripture, is often synonymous with *chaos and disorder* which can seem to describe our Christian lives at times. Right? For example, in Psalm 65:5-8a we read: "By awesome deeds you answer us with righteousness, O God of our salvation, the hope of all the ends of the earth and the farthest seas; the one who by his strength established the mountains, being girded with might; who stills the *roaring of the seas*, the roaring of the waves, the *tumult of the peoples*, so that those who dwell at the ends of the earth are in awe at your signs." (see also Psalm 107:23-32; Revelation 21:1)

Clearly, the narrative that we're looking at takes place, literally, on the Sea of Galilee but it also points to *chaos and disorder* as we'll see. Coming back to our text, there's an urgent need that the disciples have to grow in their trust of Jesus no matter how difficult life can be; no matter how difficult the *storms of life* are; no matter how much they suffer. Because of Jesus, no Christian should ever need to yield to unhealthy fears in our lives. Let's look now from Storm at Sea to:

—Suffering and Fear

As they continue in the boat across the Sea of Galilee, Mark records that "the disciples were making headway *painfully* for the wind was against them." (Mark 6:48) The word translated "painfully" is a vivid word that can be used in the sense of "extreme pain" or even "torture or torment." For example, in Matthew 8:6 we read: "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, *suffering terribly*." In Matthew 8:29 the same Greek word is used, spoken by demons to Jesus: "And behold, they cried out, 'What have you to

do with us, O Son of God? Are you here to *torment* us before the time?" Allow me to digress just a moment from our narrative and bring all this closer to home. Christians should want to teach our children that life can be painful at times. Don't teach your children—either by words or actions—that life is all about them and their immediate happiness. Rather, we want to teach them the truth that even though life can be difficult, we always want to give our best to Jesus. Our glorious God loves us and is working all things for our good and his glory.

The Christian life is a blessed, happy life but the goal of our lives is to glorify God, not focus our lives primarily on ourselves and our immediate happiness.

Again, what the disciples are going through as they row against the unrelenting winds was severe and painful. John and Matthew were there and they clearly want us to know that this is a terrifying experience! Although we, the readers, already know the outcome, these men may have possibly believed that it could be their last night on this earth! What does this text teach us about why fear often comes? Let me share something with you now and then I'll support it from the passage in my next article. Unhealthy fear can come in our lives when we place our *primary* focus on the *problem* rather than placing our *primary* focus on the *solution to the problem*. I am not suggesting that we ignore our problems. There will be things that we need to do in every situation. Although that is true, our *primary focus* always needs to be on God who is in control of all things. We can trust him no matter what comes.

Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois.