

THE SAVIOR WHO DIDN'T SEEM TO CARE

And when even was come. . . he saw them toiling in rowing; for the wind was contrary unto them: and about the fourth watch of the night he cometh unto them, walking upon the sea, and would have passed by them. (Mark 6.47-48)

Patience is one of the most desirable assets known to the human race. Unfortunately, most people do not possess it. Impetuous and demanding, people want things to happen quickly. Paul Lee Tan, in his invaluable book of illustrations, tells the story of a mission board that met in 1853 to discuss the closing of a station in Ongole, India. The ministry there had not been too productive for over a period of fifteen years: only ten natives had been won for Christ. Those comprised the complete membership of the Ongole church, which was called "The Lone Star" of India. The directors believed their money would be used more efficiently elsewhere.

Samuel Smith, a member of the board wrote a few lines of poetry that he read at the meeting:

Shine on, Lone Star, in grief or tears,
And sad reverses all baptised:
Shine on amid thy founder's tears
Lone stars in Heaven are not despised.

Having appreciated Smith's sentiments, the members decided unanimously to continue the work. Thirty years later that same church had grown to fifteen thousand members. Impatience might have prevented a glorious expansion of the kingdom of God in India. Jesus also was a visionary who looked beyond disappointments to ultimate triumphs. He was exceptionally wise in all His words and deeds, but occasionally it was difficult to understand what He was contemplating. Christ was an exception to the oft-repeated lines:

131

Patience is a virtue;
Possess it if you can;
It is seldom found in women,
And never in a man.

The Strange Persuasion... Directing

The beach was crowded with weary people who should have been at home. They were tired but excited for they had seen Jesus feeding thousands of hungry people with five loaves and two fishes. A small boy's lunch had been used to provide a banquet. But night was approaching; children should be in their beds, and even parents needed rest. The disciples vainly tried to disperse the crowds, but the people wondered if the Lord would perform other miracles and did not wish to miss anything.

Jesus realized the difficulty of the situation, "And straightway he constrained his disciples to get into the ship, and to go to the other side before unto Bethsaida, while he sent away the people" (Mark 6:45). Evidently the disciples were unwilling to go, assuring the Master they were quite capable of dispersing the crowd. Their reluctance to obey the command of the Lord became evident when He firmly told them to leave. He constrained them. His command was insistent and compelling: "Please get into that boat, and leave the rest to me. I can manage this problem!GO!"

They were standing on the beach not far from Capernaum, which was situated at the north end of the Sea of Galilee. Bethsaida was directly across the lake. Probably the large audience had come from

THE SAVIOR WHO DIDN'T SEEM TO CARE

all the cities in the area. It was possible to walk around the north shore where boats were not needed. Jesus knew that if the disciples left the vicinity and He went into the mountain, the crowds would disperse and not reappear until the next day. When the disciples began their journey over the water, the Savior did as He had promised, but there was a new gleam of excitement in His eyes. He was about to perform an even greater miracle than the feeding of the thousands.

Slowly He climbed the mountain, but His thoughts were with the men in the ship. He knew that a great storm was approaching, and desired the disciples to be on the lake before it commenced. Experienced fishermen would never launch a boat into the teeth of a gale. The Lord smiled. He had succeeded in dispatching His friends; the waves had not yet started to batter the shoreline.

132

The Serious Plight ... Disturbing

"And when even was come [6P.M.], the ship was in the midst of the sea, and he alone on the land. And he saw them toiling in rowing; for the wind was contrary unto them." It had happened: terrifying winds had rushed down the ravines, the water in the lake seemed to be boiling, and only frenzied efforts prevented the ship from capsizing. It was perplexing! The disciples loved and trusted their Master, but some of His actions baffled them. As they struggled to control their boat, they remembered that Jesus had sent them on this voyage. His motives were hard to understand. Why had He done this when a terrific storm was approaching. They frowned; it did not make sense! Mark said, "And about the fourth watch of the night [3 A.M.] he cometh unto them, walking on the sea, and would have passed by them." The time difference is intriguing. He saw them struggling at sunset but He did not go to their assistance until 3 A.M. That supplied a time lapse of about nine hours, during which the Savior allowed His friends to fight for their lives. Why did Jesus wait so long before going to help His friends? That type of question has been asked throughout the centuries.

This strange story relates to every Christian whose life sometimes resembles the Sea of Galilee. At one time or another, all believers wonder why God moves so slowly. Does God care when He permits many of His children to struggle for weeks, months, and even years in storms they cannot control? It would be refreshing if the Lord answered prayers more quickly. People laughed in one of my services when I asked: "Have you ever wanted to get behind the Lord and give Him a push?" Some people believe they could set a city on fire while God is looking for a match. The poet wrote,

God moves in a mysterious way;
His wonders to perform.
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Those words written by William Cowper are entrancing, but occasionally are unattractive and frustrating. Everybody knows that God can still storms, but why does He delay doing so? To the desperate men on the lake, those nine hours were a lifetime! Evidently, Jesus knew what was to happen and used the circumstances to deepen the faith of the men He loved and trusted. Those weary fishermen came ashore wiser and better men than they were when they commenced their journey.

133

It might also be claimed that since He apparently ignored their plight "he would have passed by them" "He desired to hear their appeal for help. They "cried out... and were troubled. And immediately

THE SAVIOR WHO DIDN'T SEEM TO CARE

he talked with them, and saith unto them, Be of good cheer: it is I; be not afraid" (vv. 49-50). That was a very long and stormy night. The terrible experience not only lasted until midnight, it extended through the early hours of the morning. When the winds ceased and the waves disappeared, those wet, shivering fishermen sat in their boat and stared in amazement: "Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God" (Matt. 14:33).

That stirring account helps every person whose turbulent life resembles the Sea of Galilee. At one time or another every Christian has asked why it takes the Lord so long to answer prayer. Faith is often born in a storm. Ultimately, the disciples said, "Of a truth thou art the Son of God." It took strong winds and threatening waves to produce that glorious testimony. They would not have learned this lesson had they stayed all night close to a fire in a lake-side cottage.

The Strange Patience ... Delaying

Why did the Savior wait so long before commencing His rescue effort? Evidently He was aware what would happen before the incident ended. Yet to watch beloved friends fighting for their lives and to delay helping them needs an explanation.

Was Christ trying to instruct them? They were experienced fishermen who had weathered many storms; this was not the first time their lives had been in jeopardy. They were self-reliant, confident, and skilled in their profession. Yet they had to be reminded that in the most important matters of life they urgently needed Christ—they were unable to save themselves. That indisputable fact was to become the basic message in the gospel to be proclaimed to the nations. Minor problems might be solved, but in the important matter of survival, sinners would need the assistance of the Savior.

Was Christ trying to encourage persistence? When difficulties appear to be overwhelming, many people lose hope and abandon their efforts. Sometimes God appears to arrive late—but He is never too late to help His children. It took nine hours for Jesus to reach that sinking boat, when the journey of two or three miles might have been completed in an hour, or perhaps even in five seconds! (see Acts 8:39-40).

Was Christ trying to open their eyes? The disciples had already spent much time with the Lord, seen manifestations of miraculous power,

134

and listened to speculations concerning His identity. They knew Him to be a faithful friend, an expert teacher, and secretly hoped He would be the Messiah. Nevertheless, their spiritual education was far from complete. Their perception had been limited through lack of faith and forgetfulness. The questioning world of the future would need greater truth than they already possessed. The preachers would need to know who He was and give reasonable explanations for events that, at first sight, appeared to be tragic. They had to be sure He was the Son of God, who, had He desired, could have obliterated His enemies. Education is a slow process, but students in God's academy never graduate until they can exclaim, "Of a truth thou art the Son of God" (Matt. 14:33).

Another answer may be the most vital of all. Yet its implications are far reaching and can only be expressed with reverence and awe. Did Christ remain to pray in the hillside because that was where the real victory was won? Were the forces of evil endeavoring to drown the men who were to become the leaders of the Christian church? Satan was called "the prince of the powers of the air," and many people believe he controls the elements. Is it possible he was trying to destroy the church even before its birth?

Christ was a perfect man, but that did not mean He could do everything. He abandoned His robes of royalty to become a man (Phil. 2:7), but within the limits of humanity were some things beyond His

THE SAVIOR WHO DIDN'T SEEM TO CARE

capability? Satan believed this when he tried in vain to persuade the Lord to jump from the pinnacle of the temple. If Jesus had yielded to that suggestion, a special miracle would have been necessary to prevent injury to the Savior's body as it fell upon the rocks beneath the temple.

It is important to remember that prior to emergencies and before every important decision made during the Lord's life, Jesus communed with His Father. Was this done to receive guidance or obtain strength? Something necessitated the Lord's praying for nine hours while His friends were fighting for their lives. The reason for that prolonged time of intercession must have been very important. As a man, was it beyond the power of Christ to terminate the storm and rescue His friends? Did Satan strive in every way possible to prevent that achievement? The same thing happened in the Garden of Gethsemane and at the cross where Jesus defeated His adversaries. That explanation opens up vast areas of possibility.

It may never be known whether any or all of these suggestions had a part in the mysterious behavior of the Lord. If the true victory were

135

won on the mountain, it was to be expected that the celebrations would take place on the lake. People in a storm-tossed boat should never despair; Christ's help may already be on its way.

The Superb Power ... Delivering

Many fishermen are superstitious; when certain things happen on the first day of a new season, they return to their homes and begin fishing the next day. I found this procedure difficult to understand when I worked in the Shetland Islands. This is the legacy of generations and is faithfully preserved, especially in isolated islands. It was not surprising when the disciples of Jesus jumped to the conclusion that a ghost or spirit was approaching their boat, but it was strange that He appeared to be ignoring them. He did not respond to faith, for they had none, but when they expressed fear, instantly He was ready to assist. His words, "Be of good cheer: it is I; be not afraid," brought peace to their troubled souls. But why Peter should ask to be invited to walk upon the water may remain a mystery forever. The man was already very wet; things could hardly get worse! He was not himself when he began his exhilarating experience. Later in his lifetime, Peter walked upon many troubled seas. Perhaps Jesus was teaching him to know that unless he constantly looked to his Lord, disaster would be inevitable. The apostle needed to learn that lesson; he was an expert at getting into trouble!

It was inexplicable; the silence was frightening. Mysteriously the wind had been hushed and the waves were quickly subsiding. Stars were reappearing in the sky, but it all happened so quickly; it was unbelievable. Suddenly, the men could see the shore where lights were shining in the homes of the people. The fishermen looked at Jesus who was helping Peter get back into the boat. Their spontaneous cry of faith was inspiring: "Of a truth thou art the Son of God." Probably the eyes of the Savior were filled with delight. The miracle on the sea had accomplished more than His messages in the streets.

"And when they were gone over, they came unto the land of Gennesaret. And when the men of that place had knowledge of him, they sent out into all that country round about, and brought unto him all that were diseased; And besought him that they might only touch the hem of his garment: and as many as touched were made perfectly whole" (Matt. 14:34-36).

It was never revealed how many storm-tossed souls found peace on that remarkable visit to Gennesaret. At first the disciples were instructed

136

THE SAVIOR WHO DIDN'T SEEM TO CARE

to go before unto Bethsaida, but the storm interfered with that plan; the men came ashore some miles to the south. Later, when the inhabitants of the district reflected on the events of that day, they had reason to thank God; the tempest had brought to them unexpected visitors. Even storms can be a blessing when they are controlled by the Creator of the world.

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