

Asleep in the Storm

Luke 8:22-25

The first half of Luke 8 has been Jesus teaching on how we respond to the word of God: are we going to be fertile soil, or is the word going to shrivel up or get strangled by thorns? Are we going to let the light of God's word shine in our lives or are we going to stick a bucket over that light?

But in the second half of Luke 8, Luke takes a different tack. He brings together 4 events in Jesus ministry and he groups them together for a reason. Each of the events we are going to read about over the next few weeks tells us something more about Jesus – in particular about his power and authority. The healing of a man whose life has been wrecked by demonic powers tells us Jesus has power of the forces of darkness and evil. The healing of a woman who's been sick for twelve years, who no one else could heal tells us Jesus has authority over disease. The raising from the dead of a little girl tells us Jesus has the ultimate power over death.

But the account we're going to look at this morning is just as remarkable.

Sovereign over the storm

Now if you've grown up in the church and you've heard this account of Jesus calming the storm as a Sunday school story it may seem old hat to you, but that this man Jesus has authority and power over the forces of nature is incredible. A few years back we were on holiday in France when a tornado ripped through the village where we were staying. We had never seen a wind with such awesome power or the devastation it caused, and the thought that a man could step out into the midst of that and with a word tell it to stop and the wind obey him is mind blowing.

And it's not as if Jesus boat was full of townies and office boys who are suddenly getting a bit panicky over nothing! Sure Matthew the tax collector was there – and, let's face it, a partnership in the local tax collecting firm was the closest he'd ever been to a ship; but this boat was manned by seasoned sailors, fishermen like Peter and Andrew and James and John, who knew this lake, but who are suddenly caught up in one of these windstorms that the sea of Galilee is famous for, and they are left fearing for their lives. And with good reason: Luke tells us that the boat was filling with water and if things didn't change soon, they'd be going down.

But with a simple rebuke Jesus stops the storm. And the men in that boat knew it was no coincidence – as the wind disappeared, and the waves vanished, as they were surrounded on all sides by a calm, as Luke puts it, they know what's happened, and are left saying to each other, v25, 'who then is this, that he commands even winds and water and they obey him?'

And that's a great question. Because if this is more than a nice Sunday school story, and it is, then who is Jesus? Well that's the first of three implications I want to draw out of Jesus having the power over these forces of nature:

1. Who Jesus is.

When I was a boy my father had a boat that we used to sail out of a natural harbour on the south coast of England called Bosham. And Bosham Harbour is famous for being the place where the Viking King, King Canute tried to turn back the waves. You see Canute was surrounded by fawning, flattering courtiers who would tell him: "You're the greatest man that ever lived, no one is as mighty as you, O king, nothing in all the world would dare to disobey you." But Canute was a better man than to believe that and so, when one of his men said that Canute could even command the sea to obey him, he decided to give his court an object lesson in humility, and setting up his throne on the low water mark, and sitting down on it, with his courtiers around him he declared, "*Let all men know how empty and worthless is the power of kings. For there is none worthy of the name but God, whom heaven, earth and sea obey*". And then with the tide beginning to come in, he proceeded to command it to turn back, but it just kept coming in, and with the water slowly getting higher, he wouldn't let his courtiers leave until the last man admitted that Canute had no such power.

Why? Because Canute was just a man, and yet here is Jesus calming this storm with a word. He is the sovereign king that Canute knew he wasn't, the only King worthy of the name, 'whom heaven and earth and sea obey.' Listen to Psalm 89:8-9 'O Lord God of hosts, who is mighty as you are, O Lord, with your faithfulness all around you? You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them.' You see for these Jewish men in the boat with Jesus, the raging waters represented the forces of chaos – and God is sovereign over them – so as they calm down they are left asking themselves – who is this man in the boat with us that even nature obeys him?'

2. The second implication is that if Jesus could stop this storm with a word, surely he could have stopped it happening in the first place. In fact, He could stop any of the storms that hit our lives – the storms of cancer, or mistreatment at the hands of others, of business going down the pan, of children going their own way. If He is sovereign over nature, if He can still a storm, couldn't he have stopped these happening? Indeed he could and yet he doesn't.

In fact Jesus goes so far as to *promise* that we will experience times like this in our lives. John 16:33 'In the world you *will* have tribulation – storms will hit you - But take heart; I have overcome the world.' He is sovereign, he rules over all these forces, he has overcome the world, and yet he allows us to experience them. In Acts 14:22, Paul and Barnabas encourage the new Christians, just coming to faith, not with a gospel that says you've come to faith in Jesus so now you can expect life to be easy and your path is going to be strewn with flowers, but that 'through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.' You don't get a free pass, Paul and Barnabas say, you've got to go through them. And Peter says in 1 Peter 4:12 'Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.' It's almost as if Peter is saying: These storms aren't strange, it's not like: 'this shouldn't be happening to me, I'm a Christian!' To be tried in the fire of adversity is a normal part of the Christian life.

In fact Spurgeon, speaking on this passage sees a pattern – that God allows and ordains these storms of adversity to come *after* periods of blessing: Jesus has been healing people, and delivering people from demons, and teaching life changing truth. Things seem to be going so well, but then the storm comes. The new born church enjoys the incredible blessing of the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, which is quickly followed by persecution. Peter preaches a sermon that sees the church grow by 3000 in one day and shortly after he's thrown into prison. And whether it is in the life of a church like ours, or our own individual lives, we can experience times of great blessing but on the heels of that comes the storm rolling down the mountains.

3. But there is a third implication and that is that if Jesus is Sovereign over the storm and if he allows these storms, even ordains these storms in our lives, then he is also sovereign over your life during your storm. You are not at the mercy of the forces of nature. You are not at the mercy of your employer or your supervisor. You are not at the mercy of cancer or infertility or any other health issue. These things aren't your Sovereign. God is.

And yet it can seem, like it did for these disciples, that you are being overwhelmed by what you are facing, and the waves are going to swamp you, and all the time, it seems, Jesus is asleep.

Sleeping in the storm

Luke tells us in v23 that 'as they sailed he (Jesus) fell asleep.' So the man who calms this storm, the one who is sovereign over all nature, is a man. He is tired and weary and takes a nap on a pillow in the stern of the boat. He was a real genuine man, not some kind of spook in man's clothing, immune to the pressures of real life. He knew what it was to feel, 'I just need to lie down for a bit.' He knows what it was to endure the storm of mocking, of seeming failure, or friends and enemies turning against him. He knew in all its horror the storm of sin. The Son of God made himself one of us. So the writer to the Hebrews can say 'we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses' (Hebrews 4:15). God has not stood aloof unable to comprehend what life means. We can never throw the charge at him, as our children might at us, 'o you just don't understand!' He understands, he has felt and lived our humanity.

But that is of more importance than simply to give us the warm fuzzies! Hebrews goes on to say that it is precisely because Jesus lived as a man, was tempted as a man, suffered as a man and died for our sins as a man that we are able, with confidence, 'to draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need' (Heb 4:16).

But with Jesus fast asleep and pushing up the z's, and with this storm worsening by the minute, the disciples feel like they're on their own, and they do what many of us have done when we face things seemingly falling apart: we don't so much turn *to* God as turn *on* God. Mark tells us what Luke doesn't and that is that as they woke Jesus the disciples were saying to him 'don't you care that we are perishing?' The storm, and the fact that Jesus is doing nothing about it, that he's just sleeping, makes them doubt his love for them: don't you care, Jesus? And

circumstances can do that, can't they? We are confident in God's love for us when everything goes well, but when trouble comes and the wind and the waves pick up, and God seems to do nothing about it, and our prayers go unanswered and all we can hear from the back of the boat is snoring, we question that: God, don't you care? How could you let me go through this? How could you let this happen to so and so?

That's a theme the psalmists knew well. Psalm 44 records the despair of the people of Israel (v9-12): 'But you have rejected us and disgraced us and have not gone out with our armies. You have made us turn back from the foe, and those who hate us have gotten spoil. You have made us like sheep for slaughter and have scattered us among the nations. You have sold your people for a trifle.' Then v23 'Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord? Rouse yourself!'

Wake up God, there is this storm and you're not answering, you're not doing anything about it! It's interesting isn't it, that not only is God sovereign over the storm, and not only does he allow us to experience them, he often doesn't seem in quite the same hurry as we are to calm them. We want it to end now and God is content to let the wind blow just a little bit longer. Because far from the difficulties and adversity we face being an indication of a lack of God's care on our behalf, it's the opposite. It's because he cares and loves us that he allows us to experience such times: Hebrews 12:5-7: 'Have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons.'

Don't you care Jesus that we are about to perish? It's because he cares that he allows such things to happen. It is after all what Joseph learnt after being sold into slavery by his brothers and being falsely accused of attempted rape, and enduring seemingly wasted years in jail, - he could say to his brothers who started it all: 'what you meant for evil, God meant for good.' You unleashed this storm against me, and God meant it for good.

But what is that good? What is it that God want's us to learn, the good that comes out of the storm, that we can't learn sitting on a deckchair in the sun?

Teaching during the storm

You see Jesus doesn't just perform miracles as some kind of stunt, he uses them both to reveal things about himself and to teach through them. And so when this little boat is enveloped by the storm, it isn't just that these disciples are left with this question of who Jesus is, hanging in the air, Jesus also uses it to probe into their hearts.

V24-25: And they went and woke him, saying, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and the raging waves, and they ceased and there was a calm. And he said to them, "Where is your faith?"

Now, note what he does and doesn't say. He doesn't criticize them for being worried, for not being at peace in the midst of the storm. He doesn't even accuse them of having no faith. Instead he asks them where their faith is. You see they've got faith – they know Jesus is the answer, they know enough to come to Jesus and wake him. They have faith, but they're simply not exercising it. They have faith but it's hidden away and Jesus is using this to tell them, you need to get your faith out and use it. You need to direct your faith towards me. You need to trust me.

And for you and me, when we are tempted to question God's love and care in the storm, it's the opportunity, the teaching moment, to take our faith out and use it. To trust God that if he sent his son to die on the cross for my sin, if that is the extent of his love for me, then I can trust him to bring me through this storm. And if, just as Jesus told these disciples at the beginning of the trip, 'let us go across to the other side of the lake' and if Jesus has declared his intent to get them to the other side, he will, so he has promised us that he will never leave us or forsake us, so he will never leave us or forsake us. It is faith applied in the midst of pressure.

And just a word to the men: when your family faces a storm it's down to you to lead them through it. Not by your raw energy, or with gritted teeth and determination alone, but with a faith that looks to Jesus, that trusts his good care, and that expresses that to your wife and kids.

But whilst we may never know, like Job in the Old testament never knew why he had to go through the storm he went through, the Bible gives us some other reasons, some key learning points to explain why God at times allows us to experience such times.

1. That we might learn humility. When you face a storm in your life, like these men did, what you learn pretty quickly is that you are not God. You realize that maybe you were not quite as in control of your life as you thought you were. You see, they learnt that *they* couldn't stop the storm but that Jesus could. They learnt that whilst they weren't in control, Jesus was. They didn't come out of this storm thinking 'aren't we so cool, aren't we so together' they came out marveling at Jesus, saying 'who is this man?' You see storms of trouble, even of failure, are sometimes sent to teach us humility, so we might learn that He is God and we are not, because his power is made perfect in our weakness. They are his gracious gift to us: because if God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble, when God allows us to experience something that humbles our pride we should be thankful, not resentful.

2. That we might learn comfort: In 2 Cor 1 Paul tells the Church at Corinth that one of the reasons he and his team had suffered as much as they had was that having experienced God's comfort for themselves, they might be able to comfort others who suffer: 2 Cor 1:3-4 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction." In other words, because trial and difficulty and affliction are a fact of life in a fallen

world, God does not spare his children these things; so that having experienced such times your self and having learnt by experience, and by scars, the comfort of God in those times, you can comfort others. You see, how can you help someone who is experiencing failure in whatever area, if it has always been glorious success for you?

3. The Lord (who is sovereign) allows us to go through such times for our own personal growth. In fact, as I was thinking about this this week, I went back to the parable of the sower and the soils, where Jesus says that the seed that fell on the rocks, on the shallow soil, withered away when the sun came, because it had no root – and the sun coming up and scorching the new shoots Jesus says are times of tribulation and persecution: it's the storms of life. But what's interesting is that the same sun rises on the seed on the good soil. These shoots aren't spared the tribulation and persecution – but what scorches and withers the seed without roots causes that with roots, in good soil, to grow.

As Jesus says in John 15:2 'every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.' These trials we face are the gardener taking care of his fruitful vine, pruning it, cutting stuff off, not to kill the vine, though it might feel like that if you're the vine, but so it becomes even more fruitful. And having told us God disciplines us because he loves us as his sons, the writer to the Hebrews goes on to say (12:10-11), 'He disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.' You see, when Jesus allows us to go through painful storms, even crisis, and when he appears to be asleep and delays in calming the storm, he has something higher in mind than our temporary comfort: it is our growth in holiness and godliness and fruitfulness.

And so as this calm descends on the lake and we see these disciples, amazed at Jesus, wondering who is this, you and I can know, that whilst we may never be free from trouble in this life, we are not helpless in the face of trouble, but that 'for those who love God all things -even the storms - work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.' (Rom 8:28)