

Divine Life: Triumphant Over Natural Forces

by T. Austin-Sparks

Jesus trains His disciples to lead them to faith and receive life, and His power over natural forces is stronger than any adversity they may face.

Scripture: John 20:30

Topics: "Discipleship", "Overcoming Adversity"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the training of disciples through the signs performed by Jesus, particularly focusing on the fifth sign of Jesus walking on water. He explains that Jesus constrained His disciples to enter the boat, knowing they would face a storm, to teach them about His authority over natural forces and the importance of faith. The storm symbolizes the challenges and evil forces in the world, while Jesus' ability to walk on water illustrates His power to overcome these adversities. Sparks encourages believers to understand that while they may face troubles, they are not alone, as Jesus intercedes for them and empowers them to triumph over life's storms. Ultimately, these experiences are necessary for spiritual growth and a deeper understanding of Christ's life within us.

Transcript

The matter with which we are occupied in these days is the training of disciples. One of the passages which was at the foundation was: "Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name" (John 20:30,31).

Jesus did many signs in the presence of His disciples, and John says that out of those many he selected a few, that they might lead the disciples into faith through which they would receive life. So the training of disciples is unto life. We have been seeing something of these seven signs that John chose for that purpose: seven signs given by Jesus in the presence of His disciples and intended to result in life.

We are the Lord's disciples also, and He would train us in the same way, so that the result of His training of us might be His own life in us.

We now come to the fifth of these signs.

Reading: John 6:16-21.

This is not a very long story, but it is very full. It is one sign which John selected out of the many, and if he decided, out of so many, to include this one in his seven, he must have regarded it as being very important.

You will have noticed that this was something for the disciples alone. The multitude had gone away, and Jesus was going to deal with the disciples alone. It was therefore something very important as to their training.

Both Matthew and Mark record this incident, and they have more to say about it than John has, which means that John had just his one object and was reducing this whole thing to one purpose. But in Matthew and Mark it says that Jesus constrained the disciples to enter into the boat, and that word 'constrain' is a very strong word. It means 'to make necessary' - Jesus made it necessary for them to get into that boat. That word 'constrain' is translated in several other ways in the New Testament, and they will give you some idea of how strong the word is.

You will remember the incident when the woman with her infirmity pressed through the multitude and touched the hem of the Lord's garment, and Jesus knew that virtue had gone out of Him. He looked round and said: 'Who touched Me?' The disciples said: "Master, the multitude throng thee and press thee, and sayest thou, Who touched me?" (Luke 8:45 - A.V.). That word 'throng thee' is the same word in the Greek as this word 'constrain'. Have you ever been in a multitude? How helpless you are when you get into a great crowd of people! If they are all moving in one direction, it is no use trying to go in the other. They constrain you to go their way. As you see, it is a strong word.

Then, when Jesus was arrested to stand His trial, it says: "And the men that held Jesus" (Luke 22:63). That word is the same as is here translated 'constrained'. I hope that no one here has ever been arrested by a strong policeman! But if that has ever been your experience, you know it is no use trying to get away. He just takes hold of you and says: 'Come with me', and it is no use resisting him. He constrains you to go - and that is the word. Jesus constrained His disciples to get into that boat. It was not just a request - He did not say: 'Now, I would like you to get into that boat.' He said: 'I want you to get into that boat and go over to the other side.'

You may think that is just a lot of words, but you will see before we have finished that it is very important to this sign.

Now if Jesus knew what He would do about feeding the five thousand when He asked Philip: "Whence are we to buy bread, that these may eat? And this he said to prove him: for he himself knew what he would do" (John 6:5), He knew quite well what He was doing when He constrained the disciples to get into that boat. That is, He had a plan and a purpose already in His mind - it was a deliberate part of their training. Jesus was always putting these disciples into situations which would make it necessary for them to make a new discovery of Himself. We saw how true that was in the case of the feeding of the five thousand. He deliberately put His disciples into a situation which made it absolutely necessary for them to discover something new of Him. And that is exactly what He was doing on this occasion. The storm that took place on the lake was no surprise to Jesus - He knew all about it before it happened. He knew it was going to happen - and He constrained them to get into the boat.

So we come from the story to the sign. I think there are four signs inside this one sign, but let us remind ourselves of this - that a sign is something more than an actual event. It implies that the event has a deeper meaning than itself. John does not call this a miracle: he calls it a sign. He says that there is a

meaning hidden inside this event, and we are going to see what a very great meaning there was in it. For we must remember that Jesus knew all things. He was always teaching and working in the light of the future, and the whole future was inside this sign.

Now look at the details. Jesus at this time was up in the mountain praying, making intercession, and you know that mountains in the Bible always have a spiritual significance. They speak of the high places. So the first thing we have inside this sign is Jesus exalted to "the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3). The Psalmist, in prophesying about Jesus, said: "Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led thy captivity captive" (Psalm 68:18). "He raised him from the dead, and made him to sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all" (Ephesians 1:20). And what is He doing up there? The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us: "He ever liveth to make intercession" (Hebrews 7:25). He is praying, making intercession for the saints, up in the heavenly mountain. "Thou hast ascended on high" - 'Thou art making intercession.' That is in this sign. Jesus was working with the future in mind and was foreseeing the time when it would be true that 'all authority had been given unto Him in heaven and on earth' - and, we may say, on the sea as well.

That is the sign in general. Jesus is up on high making intercession, and He was already, by this sign, telling the disciples something about what it would be like in the future.

Then, next, note the sign of the sea. I expect you know that the sea is often used in the Bible as a type of the world and the nations of this world. When Jesus called Simon, the fisherman, from the sea He said: "I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19) - in other words: 'I will send you into the nations to be fishers.' The Sea of Galilee was only a type of the world and its people. And Peter did get a great multitude of fishes on the Day of Pentecost. Read again the description of the people who were in Jerusalem on that day. It mentions a whole list of nationalities represented there, and sums it all up: "Every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5). And this great spiritual fisherman let down his net on the Day of Pentecost and got a draught of fishes. The sea is quite clearly a type of the nations of the world.

But how restless the nations are! The sea is a very restless thing. It is always changing, and you can never be sure of it. Sometimes it is in a tempest, and then sometimes it seems to be quiet and placid, but it is a very uncertain thing. When the disciples set out that evening the sea seemed to be quite quiet, but it was not long before it changed its face. You will remember, on Paul's last journey to Rome by ship, the sea was very calm when they set sail, but it was not long before the whole situation changed. How quickly the sea can change! How restless the nations are, and how uncertain are the situations in this world! Perhaps that was never more true than it is today - the nations are in a tumult!

Now Jesus deliberately sent these men into the sea, and that is the sign of the sea, or the meaning of the sea.

What about the storm? What is the sign of the storm? It says that a great wind was blowing - 'there arose a strong wind'. There are evil forces at work over and around the nations of this world - the very atmosphere is full of them, and these forces, like the wind, are stirring up things against the people of God. That was never more true than it is today. What a mighty wind is blowing against the people of God! In so many nations, in Russia, in China, in Congo, and in many other places, the evil forces are against the Lord's people, stirring things up against them. But we do not have to go to those countries to prove it. If we are the Lord's people we are all conscious that there are evil forces against us. There is a strong wind blowing and it is contrary - it is hard work to row against it. The Lord had told His disciples that it would be like that,

and that the time was coming when 'they would be hated of all men for His sake'. He said: "In the world ye have tribulation" (John 16:33). Yes, He had told them that it would be like this - that, as they went into the nations, they would find everything against them. He knew all about it a long time before... but He sent them into it.

Next, the sign of His walking on the sea. We note here in this story that although Jesus was away up on the mountain, and they were away down on the sea, He knew all about their situation. He was not out of touch with them. He knew exactly what was happening. That is, of course, simple, but it is very comforting. If He is in Heaven (and I do not know where that is), and we are down here on this earth, even if there is a long way between the two, He knows all about our situation. He is closely in touch with the position that we are in.

The natural thing was that they would be overpowered and forced under by this sea. There was an occasion, you remember, when they were on the same sea and the same kind of storm arose. That time they awoke the Lord Jesus, saying: "Master, we perish" (Luke 8:24). This was another experience like that, and it was quite the natural thing that these adverse forces should drown them, should prove to be too strong for them. Naturally they would go under. And Jesus came to them walking on the water.

What did the disciples learn that night? That if Jesus is present all the natural course of things is reversed. Natural laws are just turned round the other way. He has ascendancy over all the natural forces. His life is more powerful than all the forces which are against it. And that is what He was trying to teach these disciples.

Now, of course, we can interpret this in our own experience, for we know something about adversity in this world and the tremendous spiritual forces that are against us. But perhaps many of us know the other side of the story - that naturally we should many times have gone under and these other forces would have proved to be far too powerful for us. The natural forces in our own selves are far too strong for us. It is not difficult for us to go down under the natural forces in our own make-up, in our circumstances, in other people, and, yes, even in other Christians - Paul had a real battle with the natural forces in the believers at Corinth. And then there are the natural forces in this world - but all these natural forces are reinforced by super-natural evil forces. There is something more than ourselves and other people - there is the devil working in and through us, working through other people and creating circumstances. I confess to you that one of the problems in the New Testament which I have never solved is something that Paul said: "We would fain have come unto you, I Paul once and again; and Satan hindered us" (1 Thessalonians 2:18). I have never been able to explain that! But, you see, the enemy is right up against what is of the Lord in this world, and his power reinforcing the natural things is far too much for you and for me. Surely we have all proved that! We do not have to go outside ourselves. Do we not know that there are forces inside us which are too strong for us? If we were left to ourselves they would overpower us and put us under.

Yes, this storm on the lake has a very real counterpart in the spiritual life of the Lord's people. But what I began to say was this: that we have not yet gone under. We who are the Lord's people are not under yet! The enemy has had a good try to put us under; people have had a good try to put us under; and the world has had a good try to put us under - but so far we are not under. Why is that? Because we are so strong? Oh no, never that! Because we have such a determined will? Because we say: 'I am not going under!?' That is a challenge to the devil which he will quickly take up. Oh no, it is nothing like that. It is because this same Jesus is inside, this One who can walk upon the water. He is not struggling with the water or the Wind - He has them under His feet: "All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth. Go ye

therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (Matthew 28:18,19). 'You will find plenty of storms there, but "lo, I am with you all the days" (Matthew 28:19).' It is the power of His life that is stronger than all the storms.

Jesus taught the disciples this in His act, and they lived to prove it in their own experience and history.

Note this last thing. When our life is committed to Christ we are not always kept from trouble. He very often deliberately leads us into it. He constrains us to get into that boat. Of course, we do not know what is going to happen, but we do know that the Lord is making us go in a certain direction - and then we meet trouble. We have to say: 'Well, the Lord has brought us into this trouble. He is responsible for our being in this situation.' We may be wholly committed to the Lord, but that does not mean that we are going to be kept free from trouble. If you think that by being thoroughly devoted to the Lord you are going to be saved from trouble, you are going to find that that is not true. A lot of young Christians think like that. When I was a young Christian I used to think: 'If only I am out and out for the Lord, He will be out and out for me and I will never have any trouble.' I have lived to see that that is a mistake. No, wholly committed people are not saved from trouble, but they are made ascendant over it, or they are kept through it by His power. The trouble does not destroy them. It becomes the means in the Lord's hands of teaching them some very valuable lessons, and afterward they say: 'It was worth all the trouble.' "All chastening seemeth for the present to be not joyous, but grievous: yet afterward it yieldeth peaceable fruit... of righteousness" (Hebrews 12:11).

I wonder what these disciples said when they reached the other side! I expect, if they had an opportunity to talk together, they said: 'Well, that was a terrible experience! I really wondered what was going to happen - but I have learnt a mighty lesson of Christ's power and I would not be without the experience for anything.'

So, you see, our spiritual education rests upon this word 'necessity', for that is the real word for 'constrain'. He made it necessary for the disciples to get into the boat, and it is necessary for us to have experiences like this, because it is only by such experiences that we discover what a Christ we have, and what a wonderful thing is this eternal life.

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