

“Keep Climbing—Part 1”

A few years ago I didn't know what to get my family members for gifts anymore—there's nothing that they need. So with the help of my digital camera and some software that came with it, I started doing photo albums as gifts. It's easy on the computer. You pick out the pictures you want. You lay it all out on the screen. Adjust, rotate, crop the photos and then print it all out, put it in a binder and you're good to go. The first time I did it took forever, and I've gotten more efficient at it, but these albums, these scrapbooks, are great gifts that people love to look through over and over again.

But the problem with photo albums, scrapbooks, is that they never tell the whole story, do they? They just show off snap shots, moments, in life. And most of the time the snapshots in a scrapbook are good things, right? Pictures of birthday parties, and graduations, and weddings, and just to make sure the scrapbook looks nice and wonderful and is fun to look at, we look for pictures of people smiling. When we take pictures, what do we tell people to do? Smile! Everybody's got to be smiling. Sony's cameras now come with a smile sensor so that it will take the picture just as people smile. No more sour faces, no more frowns. All smiles. That's what a scrapbook looks like.

But what that means is that you don't see the whole story of a given family by their scrapbook, do you? Nobody brings out the photo album and says, “Oh check out this one, this is when I was a little kid right after my mom accidentally slammed my fingers in the car door! I remember that one!” You don't put that stuff in your scrapbook. “That's me getting my first speeding ticket. And that's that big fight I had with my parents where I screamed at them and they screamed at me and they took the keys away for two weeks. And that's the one where I just lost my job. That's the one where I had just lost my temper and kicked a hole in the wall. That's where I lost my cool and slapped my kid. That's me weeping over the death of my friend.” There's none of that in a scrapbook. It's usually all the good stuff. It's not necessarily false, it's just not an accurate picture of the life of a person, or the life of a family.

For lots and lots of people our image of God is like this. Not necessarily wrong information, but what we know about God is made up of little snapshots. Our image of God is made up of things we learned way back in Sunday School when we were 8, or that somebody we trusted told us when we were 17. Or what we pick up when we come to church. But even if you're here every Sunday, it's enough for you to get a clear picture, a holistic understanding of God's character. We end up with snapshots of God that are not a complete picture of who God is.

And that's important for lots of reason, but one of the biggest is that if we don't really know who God is, then when life gets hard, when the climbing gets rough, we want to give up. But the more we know about God, about God's character, about his love, about his power, the more ready we are to keep climbing.

So, during this series we're going to take a very fresh look at who God is and what he's really like. We're going to deepen our understanding of God and our relationship with God and expand our knowledge of and our relationship with our Savior.

Today I want us to focus on this: God's goal is not just to get rid of your problems in life. We tend to see him that way, but that's not his goal. **“God's goal is not to get rid of your problems in life. His goal is to mold us and shape us to be more like Jesus.”** His goal is to mold us and shape us to be more like Jesus.

But even for some long-term Christians this is not our view of being a Christ-follower. For lots of us, we deal with God like drive-through Christianity. You go up to the drive through window and say, “I'll have a quarter pounder with cheese, and fries and a diet coke, or whatever.” Then you go around and to pay for it and pick it up and say, “Bye, I'll see you next time I need you. Next time I'm hungry.” Some of us deal with God that way. We come up and there's the little screen at the drive through. The wife is next to you, the kids in the back and you say, “What do you guys want?” “OK, one financial need met, one friendship issue resolved, three emotional needs met, and make that supersize—I have a wife and two daughters.” Then you drive around and God hooks you up with your solutions and you say, “God, we'll be back when we need you.”

But that's not how God wants to operate. He doesn't want drive through Christians. God's goal isn't to get rid of our problems. God's goal is to mold us, to shape us, to be more like Jesus.

Why this is important is because if we think God's main thing is to fix our problems then we start saying, "God, if you're so powerful, why don't you fix this one little problem in this one guy's life. You're running the whole universe, this can't be that big of an issue. Just fix it." Ever said something like that to God? But he doesn't fix it?

That's where we get to this passage of scripture. Jesus had just finished teaching and preaching on the kingdom of God and on faith and they're ready to move on to another location. Here's the situation: **"That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, 'Let us go over to the other side.' Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped" (Mark 4:35-37).**

Doesn't that last part describe all of our lives at some point or another? Have you felt this way before? "God, waves have been hitting my life, all month, or all year, or for the last decade, or since May 22. And I'm just letting you know that if one more wave hits my boat, I'm going down."

Just about everybody has experienced that. We've felt like our lives are swamped. And here are the disciples in a boat with Jesus when a big old storm comes and where was Jesus? Look at this: **"Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, 'Teacher, don't you care if we drown?' He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, 'Quiet! Be still!' Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, 'Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?' They were terrified and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'" (Mark 4:38-41).**

Picture this: Huge storm—we can all picture that pretty well. Jesus is in full REM sleep here on a futon. It seems like he's oblivious to this storm that's thrashing this little boat. This disciples wake him up but they didn't say, "By the way Jesus, it's kind of crazy out here, would you mind popping up and calming the storm!" No, they show their true colors. They're panicking! "Jesus, don't you care if we drown?!"

We've all said this to God. "Do you not care? I'm trying to be a good person, but there is so much going on in my life, a single wave would topple my life. Do you not care if I drown?" Some of us might go even further in private, when nobody else is around, "God you must not care. Can't you see what I'm going through? Can't you see what I'm up against? Are you asleep on the job?"

Now here's something that's interesting to me. The disciples had already seen Jesus perform some tremendous miracles—healing people, driving out demons. They'd even seen him stand up to the religious authorities, and nobody did that. But these guys, even after seeing all those miracles, they snapped when they were in that boat and that massive storm came up. This storm seemed too big for the miracle worker. In fact, they didn't even ask Jesus to do anything. It's like they were assuming they were gonners and they just accused him. "Don't you even care?" They didn't realize who they had in the boat. They didn't understand what he really wanted to do in their lives.

I can't say that I always understand what God wants to do in my life and yours, but maybe what we can learn today is the process that God wants to take us through in the midst of our trials, our crises, our loss, our suffering. God wants to take us through a process with the purpose of shaping us to be the men and women that he wants us to be for his kingdom purposes. So that the end result, whether he performs a miracle or not, is not as important as the process he wants to take us through.

Here's the process of what God will do through the storms of life, when God's trying to change something in our lives. **1. God will allow life circumstances to shake our security. 2. Then he makes us receptive to his activity in our life. 3. Then he creates a new view.**

Let's take a closer look at these. **"A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, 'Teacher, don't you care if we drown?'" (Mark 4:37-38).**

Think about this a second. Out of 12 disciples, 4 of them had the same job. What was that job? Fisherman. 4 out of 12 were fisherman. They made their living on the sea. Listen, before they ever let their teacher, Jesus, on the boat to cross the sea of Galilee, I guarantee that they threw some grass up into the air

to check the wind. I guarantee that they looked east over the Sea of Galilee, over the hills, to see if a storm was coming so they wouldn't put their teacher in danger. Right?

They would not have gotten in that boat, they would not have let their teacher get in that boat, if they thought there was any chance of a dangerous storm coming. So this storm hit when they least expected it. Kind of like life, right? And if those 4 fisherman had security in anything, it was in their abilities on the sea; their abilities in a boat.

But here's where it gets dangerous for us. If we are basing our security on anything other than God, we are setting ourselves up to have that security shaken. And when it happens God will allow it to help us become what we can become.

Let's talk about security for a minute. 10 years ago today as a nation, as a world, our security was shaken. God didn't make those terrorists fly those planes into buildings. God wasn't punishing us. God wept at the loss of innocent life. God was angered at how callous life was treated. But he also used that time to show the world that our security can't be in our buildings, or in our government, or in our possessions, or in our wealth, or in anything else. If we find security in anything but God, when a storm hits, that's what God is going to use to help us see what we need to see.

On May 22 our security was shaken. God didn't send the tornado. That's just a part of life in a broken, imperfect world. But has used the tornado in my life and in lots of yours to show us that our security can be in stuff, in buildings, in the routines of our lives. Because all that can and will change. And God uses that to show us our false foundations.

You might be thinking right now, "That's not very nice! Why would God allow that?" God allows the storms because he understands that all this life offers is fleeting and fading. Every worldly thing you put security in can let you down. He knows that he needs to be the only foundation of the house you're building, the life you're building, with him.

So if you find security in finances, when the foundation gets shaken, like it has in the last few years, God will use that to open your eyes so you can reprioritize your life according to God. What do you find security in? Because if it's anything but God, it's going to get shaken.

Now, when those faulty foundations get shaken that leads us to the second part of the process. It makes us receptive to God's activity in our lives. **1. Our security is shaken. 2. We're receptive to God.** God allows our security to be shaken in an area we're relying on and that opens the door something amazing to happen. It puts us in a place to be, receptive to his movements. "Wow, I don't have it all together! I can't rely on those faulty foundations, where do I turn?" We find we can turn to God. That's why, for lots of us, when things are going great, we don't spend much time with God, but when the storm hits we go straight to him because he's still solid when nothing else is left standing.

God doesn't cause the storms in our lives, we do that all by ourselves or they just happen on their own, but he uses them as an open door because we're looking for something truly solid. We're looking for a real foundation. We're receptive to God.

And that's when God does the third part in this process of helping us to become like Jesus. He gives us a new view of himself, a new perspective. **1. Our security is shaken. 2. We're receptive to God. 3. We get a new view.** He'll use that time to show us something about himself that we didn't know, or God will use that time to remove some skewed understanding of him. In verse 40 Jesus says, **"Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith? They were terrified and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'" (Mark 4:40-41).**

Do you still have no faith? Do you still not see? Whatever they had before, it wasn't faith. Maybe they just saw him as a miracle worker. Maybe they saw him as a cash cow. Maybe they saw him as a way to prestige. However they saw him, it was skewed. They don't realize who they have in the boat. Because they still have a scrapbook view of God and Jesus really, really wants to change their view of him.

I go see my eye doctor, Dr. Stille, for a checkup once a year and sometimes a couple more times year when I stick myself in the eye. My last checkup was just a few weeks ago and I've never had to wear glasses or contacts, but I'm right there on the edge now. He went through the whole procedure of reading the lines on

the eye charts and then flipping the lenses back and forth: Does this look better or this, one or two, a or b. And then at the end he did the comparison. "This is how you see without any help. This is how you'd see with glasses." And I'm like, "Wow! I did not know that I couldn't see! I should not be driving! I never knew life was so blurry. I thought I could see just fine." But I'm not as bad as my wife. It hit her hard a couple years ago. She can't see anything without reading glasses—she is always handing me stuff to read to her. I'm like her seeing-eye-husband. She finally broke down and bought some reading glasses.

For lots of us it's, "I never knew life was so blurry!" What my eye doctor did for me was create perspective. Those lenses he put over my eyes, created a different view and that's often what will God will do in our lives. He'll allow circumstances in our lives to help us see life through different lenses to create a new perspective.

That's what happened that day in the boat with the disciples. And that's what he wants to do in your life and mine. He'll allow heartache, tragedy, loss, in order to get you to see him for who he is in the midst of your storm. So that we wouldn't just see him, and seek him, and praise him for the blessings in our life, but see him, and seek him, and praise him simply for being the blessing. That we would focus less on the miracle and more on Christ. The disciples didn't realize that having Jesus with them in the storm was better than any calm day without him. That our relationship would be not based on results, a drive-through Christianity, but a relationship with God built on who he is.

The title of this series is "Keep Climbing—Why God Doesn't Always Give us What We Want." And the challenge of this life of faith is to keep climbing when you want to give up, when you ask God to take away the obstacles, or difficulties, or disappointments, or pain and it doesn't look like he's going to do it. What do you do? You keep climbing.

This metaphor is going to be very real to me very soon. I said last week that I might get the chance to share our story, the story of Joplin and what we've been through, a conference of 15,000 people. It looks like that is going to happen, and that is awesome, but there's more to this story. It's the Catalyst Conference in Atlanta and I'll be making my way to Atlanta from Joplin on a bicycle—750 miles. I've been asked to join a biking group that raises funds for all kinds of different causes and they prayed that somebody from Joplin would join them to be a spokesperson, they somehow got my name and called me. I of course immediately said, "NO!" I don't bike, I've got a family to take care of, a building project at church, all kinds of other stuff. No! But I'll pray about it. And the thing about prayer is that it can change your perspective pretty quickly. And that prayer sure did. The more I prayed and the more I tried to hear God tell me that I should just stay put, the clearer it became that I was supposed to go. I asked Janet about it thinking she would say, "You can't be gone that long!" But instead she said, "I think you should do it." I kept asking people about it thinking that surely somebody would have gotten a message from God saying, "Don't do it!" But everybody was like, "Yes. Go. God's calling you to do this."

So I started biking last week. And I've got to tell you as I've biked around Joplin the phrase, "Keep Climbing" has been on my lips and mind a lot—along with several others less holy phrases. For two weeks I'll bike around 80 miles a day and speak each day in a city along the way about Joplin, about my faith, about what God is doing here. I'll do a work project in Tuscaloosa, I'll be raising funds through Convoy of Hope for our area. And God is going to show me things that will blow my mind.

Since May 22 I've found myself saying over and over again, "This is not my life." The things that brought me security, the routines I knew and loved, the places that were familiar, some people that were familiar, are gone and God has given me a chance to see him and the world from a whole new perspective.

I'm learning to keep climbing and I'm taking you with me, and you're taking me with you. God's goal is to mold us to be men and women he wants us to be for his kingdom work. To mold us to be more like him, sometimes he going to allow the foundations of our lives to be shaken if those foundations are on anything other than him.

God is doing a great work through this storm. Let's keep climbing. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Todd Phillips for his resources in this message and small group series.