

CHAPTER 6

I'm Sinking Fast

“Don’t be afraid,” he said. “Take courage. I am here!”

— MATTHEW 14:27 NLT

Fear of Overwhelming Challenges

Before the flight I'm a midlife version of Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*: wearing an air force helmet, a flight suit, and a smile the size of a watermelon slice. After the flight *Top Gun* is undone. I'm as pale as bleached bone. I list to the side, and my big smile has flattened as straight as the tarmac on which we just landed. Chalk the change up to sixty minutes of acrobatics at ten thousand feet.

I occupied the cockpit seat directly behind Lt. Col. Tom McClain. One month shy of retirement he invited me to join him on an orientation flight. The invitation came complete with

- a preflight physical (in which I was measured for the ejection seat);
- a safety briefing (in which I practiced pulling the handle for the ejection seat);
- a few moments hanging in the harness of a training para-

chute (simulating how I would return to earth after any activation of the ejection seat).

Message to air force public relations: any way to scale down the ejection-seat discussion? Turns out we didn't use it. No small accomplishment since we dived, rose, and dived again, sometimes with a vertical velocity of ten thousand feet per minute. Can you picture a roller coaster minus the rails? We flew in tandem with another T-6. At one point the two wingtips were separated by seven feet. I don't like to get that close to another person in the shopping mall.

Here's what one hour of aerial somersaults taught me:

- ✦ Fighter pilots are underpaid. I have no clue what their salary is, but it's not enough. Anyone willing to protect his country at 600 mph deserves a bonus.
- ✦ G's are well named. Funny, I thought the phrase "pulling g's" had to do with gravitational pull against your body. It actually describes the involuntary sound a minister emits during a 360-degree rollover: "G-G-G-Geee!"
- ✦ The call sign of the pilot is stenciled on the back of his helmet.

They have such great call signs: Iceman. Buff. Hatchet. Mine was Max. Pretty cool, huh? Col. McClain responds to T-Mac. It appears on the back of his helmet just above the collar line. I know this well. For fifty of the sixty minutes, I stared at his name. I read it forward, then backward, counted the letters, and created an acrostic: T-M-A-C. Tell Me About Christ. I couldn't stomach looking anywhere else. The

horizon kept bouncing. So did the instrument panel. Closing my eyes only increased the nausea. So I stared at T-Mac. After all, he was the one with nearly six thousand hours of flight time!

Six thousand hours! He's spent more time flying planes than I've spent eating pizza, a thought that occurred to me as I began regretting my dinner from the night before. Six thousand hours! The equivalent of eight months' worth of twenty-four-hour days in the air, time enough to circumnavigate the globe 143 times. No wonder he was smiling when we boarded. This sortie was a bike ride on training wheels. I actually heard him humming during a near-vertical bank turn.

Didn't take me long to figure out where to stare. No more looking down or out. My eyes were on the pilot. If T-Mac was okay, I was okay. I know where to stare in turbulence.

Peter learned the same lesson the hard way. Exchange the plane for a thirty-foot fishing boat, the San Antonio sky for a Galilean sea, and our stories begin to parallel. "But the boat was now in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary" (Matt. 14:24).

As famous lakes go, Galilee—only thirteen miles at its longest, seven and a half at its widest—is a small, moody one. The diminutive size makes it more vulnerable to the winds that howl out of the Golan Heights. They turn the lake into a blender, shifting suddenly, blowing first from one direction, then another. Winter months bring such storms every two weeks or so, churning the waters for two to three days at a time.¹

Peter and his fellow storm riders knew they were in trouble. What should have been a sixty-minute cruise became a nightlong battle. The boat lurched and lunged like a kite in a March wind. Sunlight was a distant memory. Rain fell from the night sky in buckets. Lightning

sliced the blackness with a silver sword. Winds whipped the sails, leaving the disciples “in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves.” Apt description, perhaps, for your stage in life? Perhaps all we need to do is substitute a couple of nouns . . .

In the middle of a divorce, tossed about by guilt.

In the middle of debt, tossed about by creditors.

In the middle of a recession, tossed about by stimulus packages and bailouts.

The disciples fought the storm for nine cold, skin-drenching hours. And about 4:00 a.m. the unspeakable happened. They spotted someone coming on the water. “A ghost!” they said, crying out in terror” (v. 26 MSG).

They didn’t expect Jesus to come to them this way.

Neither do we. We expect him to come in the form of peaceful hymns or Easter Sundays or quiet retreats. We expect to find Jesus in morning devotionals, church suppers, and meditation. We never expect to see him in a bear market, pink slip, lawsuit, foreclosure, or war. We never expect to see him in a storm. But it is in storms that he does his finest work, for it is in storms that he has our keenest attention.

Jesus replied to the disciples’ fear with an invitation worthy of inscription on every church cornerstone and residential archway. “‘Don’t be afraid,’ he said. ‘Take courage. I am here!’” (v. 27 NLT).

Power inhabits those words. To awaken in an ICU and hear your husband say, “I am here.” To lose your retirement yet feel the support of your family in the words “We are here.” When a Little Leaguer spots Mom and Dad in the bleachers watching the game, “I am here” changes everything. Perhaps that’s why God repeats the “I am here” pledge so often.

I'M SINKING FAST

The Lord is near. (Phil. 4:5 NIV)

You are in me, and I am in you. (John 14:20 NIV)

I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matt. 28:20 NIV)

I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. (John 10:28 NIV)

Nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. (Rom. 8:38 NLT)

We cannot go where God is not. Look over your shoulder; that's God following you. Look into the storm; that's Christ coming toward you.

Much to Peter's credit, he took Jesus at his word. "‘Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.’ So He said, ‘Come.’ And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus" (Matt. 14:28–29).

Peter never would have made this request on a calm sea. Had Christ strolled across a lake that was as smooth as mica, Peter would have applauded, but I doubt he would have stepped out of the boat. Storms prompt us to take unprecedented journeys. For a few historic steps and heart-stilling moments, Peter did the impossible. He defied every law of gravity and nature; "he walked on the water to go to Jesus."

My editors wouldn't have tolerated such brevity. They would have

flooded the margin with red ink: “Elaborate! How quickly did Peter exit the boat? What were the other disciples doing? What was the expression on his face? Did he step on any fish?”

Matthew had no time for such questions. He moves us quickly to the major message of the event: where to stare in a storm. “But when [Peter] saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, ‘Lord, save me!’” (v. 30).

A wall of water eclipsed his view. A wind gust snapped the mast with a crack and a slap. A flash of lightning illuminated the lake and the watery Appalachians it had become. Peter shifted his attention away from Jesus and toward the squall, and when he did, he sank like a brick in a pond. Give the storm waters more attention than the Storm Walker, and get ready to do the same.

Whether or not storms come, we cannot choose. But where we stare during a storm, that we can. I found a direct example of this truth while sitting in my cardiologist’s office. My heart rate was misbehaving, taking the pace of a NASCAR race and the rhythm of a Morse code message. So I went to a specialist. After reviewing my tests and asking me some questions, the doctor nodded knowingly and told me to wait for him in his office.

I didn’t like being sent to the principal’s office as a kid. I don’t like being sent to the doctor’s office as a patient. But I went in, took a seat, and quickly noticed the doctor’s abundant harvest of diplomas. They were everywhere, from everywhere. One degree from the university. Another degree from a residency. The third degree from his wife. (I’m pausing to see if you caught the joke . . .)

The more I looked at his accomplishments, the better I felt. *I’m in good hands*. About the time I leaned back in the chair to relax, his nurse

entered and handed me a sheet of paper. "The doctor will be in shortly," she explained. "In the meantime he wants you to acquaint yourself with this information. It summarizes your heart condition."

I lowered my gaze from the diplomas to the summary of the disorder. As I read, contrary winds began to blow. Unwelcome words like *atrial fibrillation*, *arrhythmia*, *embolic stroke*, and *blood clot* caused me to sink into my own Sea of Galilee.

What happened to my peace? I was feeling much better a moment ago. So I changed strategies. I counteracted diagnosis with diplomas. In between paragraphs of bad news, I looked at the wall for reminders of good news. That's what God wants us to do.

His call to courage is not a call to naïveté or ignorance. We aren't to be oblivious to the overwhelming challenges that life brings. We're to counterbalance them with long looks at God's accomplishments. "We must *pay much closer attention* to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it" (Heb. 2:1 NASB). Do whatever it takes to keep your gaze on Jesus.

When a friend of mine spent several days in the hospital at the bedside of her husband, she relied on hymns to keep her spirits up. Every few minutes she stepped into the restroom and sang a few verses of "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." Do likewise! Memorize scripture. Read biographies of great lives. Ponder the testimonies of faithful Christians. Make the deliberate decision to set your hope on him. Courage is always a possibility.

C. S. Lewis wrote a great paragraph on this thought:

Faith . . . is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods. For moods will change,

whatever view your reason takes. I know that by experience. Now that I am a Christian I do have moods in which the whole thing looks very improbable: but when I was an atheist I had moods in which Christianity looked terribly probable. . . . That is why Faith is such a necessary virtue: unless you teach your moods “where they get off,” you can never be either a sound Christian or even a sound atheist, but just a creature dithering to and fro, with its beliefs really dependent on the weather and the state of its digestion.²

Feed your fears, and your faith will starve.

Feed your faith, and your fears will.

Jeremiah did this. Talk about a person caught in a storm! Slide down the timeline to the left about six hundred years, and learn a lesson from this Old Testament prophet. “I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of [God’s] wrath; he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long” (Lam. 3:1–3 RSV).

Jeremiah was depressed, as gloomy as a giraffe with a neck ache. Jerusalem was under siege, his nation under duress. His world collapsed like a sand castle in a typhoon. He faulted God for his horrible emotional distress. He also blamed God for his physical ailments. “He [God] has made my flesh and my skin waste away, and broken my bones” (v. 4 RSV).

His body ached. His heart was sick. His faith was puny. “[God] has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation” (v. 5 RSV). Jeremiah felt trapped like a man on a dead-end street. “He has walled me about so that I cannot escape; he has put heavy chains on me; though I

call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer; he has blocked my ways with hewn stones, he has made my paths crooked" (vv. 7–9 RSV).

Jeremiah could tell you the height of the waves and the speed of the wind. But then he realized how fast he was sinking. So he shifted his gaze. "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness. 'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him'" (vv. 21–24 RSV).

"But this I call to mind . . ." Depressed, Jeremiah altered his thoughts, shifted his attention. He turned his eyes away from the waves and looked into the wonder of God. He quickly recited a quintet of promises. (I can envision him tapping these out on the five fingers of his hand.)

1. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.
2. His mercies never come to an end.
3. They are new every morning.
4. Great is thy faithfulness.
5. The Lord is my portion.

The storm didn't cease, but his discouragement did. So did Peter's. After a few moments of flailing in the water, he turned back to Christ and cried, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down" (Matt. 14:30–32 NIV).

Jesus could have stilled this storm hours earlier. But he didn't. He wanted to teach the followers a lesson. Jesus could have calmed your

storm long ago too. But he hasn't. Does he also want to teach you a lesson? Could that lesson read something like this: "Storms are not an option, but fear is"?

God has hung his diplomas in the universe. Rainbows, sunsets, horizons, and star-sequined skies. He has recorded his accomplishments in Scripture. We're not talking six thousand hours of flight time. His résumé includes Red Sea openings. Lions' mouths closings. Goliath topplings. Lazarus raisings. Storm stillings and strollings.

His lesson is clear. He's the commander of every storm. Are you scared in yours? Then stare at him. This may be your first flight. But it's certainly not his.

Your pilot has a call sign too: I Am Here.