

# TURBULENT THANKSGIVING

THANKSGIVING, 2006

Imagine what your life would be like if you had a accident that burned your face beyond recognition, and then, four years later, you were paralyzed from the waist down in an airplane crash. Could you imagine yourself becoming a respected public speaker and a successful business person - even a millionaire - after such tragic events? Could you envision yourself going white-water rafting or running for political office?

W. Mitchell has done all these things and more after 2 horrible accidents left his face and body a quilt of skin grafts, his hands fingerless, and his legs thin and motionless in a wheelchair. After a motorcycle accident left 65 percent of his body burned, Mitchell endured 16 surgeries in an attempt to piece his body back together. Even then, after all of those surgeries, his face has remained permanently disfigured and he has never been able to pick up a fork or dial a telephone. But it was after his recovery from the motorcycle accident that he co-founded a wood burning stove company in Vermont. The company had grown rapidly to become Vermont's second largest private employer when Mitchell was involved in a plane crash which crushed his 12th vertebra, permanently paralyzing him from the waist down. Many people would have given up on life if they were in Mitchell's place. But this man has been able to continue to accomplish remarkable feats because of his thankful attitude. Listen to his philosophy that he has shared on the "Today Show" and "Good Morning America". "Before I was paralyzed, there were 10,000 things

that I could do. Now there are 9,000. I have found that I can either dwell on the 1,000 that I have lost or the 9,000 that I have left. I tell people that I have had two big bumps in my life. If I have chosen not to use them as an excuse to quit, then maybe some of the experiences you are having which are pulling you back can be put into a new perspective. You can step back, take a wider view and have a chance to say, "Maybe that isn't such a big deal after all".

Since his airplane crash at age 50, W. Mitchell has taken up the sport of whitewater rafting, he has fallen in love and married, he has gone back to school and earned a master's degree in public administration, and he is in demand as a conference speaker. He has even been elected mayor of Crested Butte, Colorado and run for Congress. Mitchell's attitude and thankful spirit is seen immediately in his campaign slogan - "Not Just Another Pretty Face".

W. Mitchell is a living example of the power of a thankful spirit. For while most people are not called to bear the burdens that he has born, every single human being suffers turbulence in life. Nobody's life is placidly smooth from start to finish. In many cases, the quality of our overall life is determined by how we respond during the stormy times. If we become consumed with bitterness and self-pity during a turbulent time, that can easily become a life-style trait for us. But if we continue to follow the Scriptural mandate to be thankful in everything, then our lives become enriched and our character deepened in adversity.

I want to look with you this morning at 2 examples of Christians in turbulence. Both were servants of God who were called to go literally through

life-threatening storms. One responded with thanksgiving even in the midst of adversity, and he not only was personally blessed, but he became an encouragement to others as well. The second responded with some anger and self-pity, and from all that we know about him, even though he did repent and probably continued to have a prophetic ministry for the Lord throughout the remainder of his life, that tendency towards anger and self-pity continued to be a major problem for him affecting the pattern of his life-style. These 2 individuals become models to us both positively and negatively as to how to weather the storms of life.

The first example is in Acts 27. In the context of this passage, the apostle Paul has been imprisoned. His captors have decided to ship him to the city of Rome for trial. Now this is not a good sign for Paul. To be sent to the capital city of Rome meant that the situation was deemed very severe. And in addition to the threat of the unjust legal charge that was hanging over Paul's head, the ship that he is on goes through a life-threatening storm on the way to Rome. Notice the nature of this storm and the response that Paul has to is as I read Acts 27:13-44.

READ ACTS 27:13-44.

AC 27:13 When a gentle south wind began to blow, they thought they had obtained what they wanted; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete. <sup>14</sup> Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the "northeaster," swept down from the island. <sup>15</sup> The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along. <sup>16</sup> As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure. <sup>17</sup> When the men had hoisted it aboard,

they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Fearing that they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. <sup>18</sup> We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. <sup>19</sup> On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. <sup>20</sup> When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.

AC 27:21 After the men had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: "Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. <sup>22</sup> But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. <sup>23</sup> Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me <sup>24</sup> and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.' <sup>25</sup> So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. <sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island."

AC 27:27 On the fourteenth night we were still being driven across the Adriatic Sea, when about midnight the sailors sensed they were approaching land. <sup>28</sup> They took soundings and found that the water was a hundred and twenty feet deep. A short time later they took soundings again and found it was ninety feet deep. <sup>29</sup> Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight. <sup>30</sup> In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow. <sup>31</sup> Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved." <sup>32</sup> So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it fall away.

AC 27:33 Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. "For the last fourteen days," he said, "you have been in constant suspense and have gone without

food--you haven't eaten anything. <sup>34</sup> Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head." <sup>35</sup> After he said this, he took some bread and **gave thanks to God** in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. <sup>36</sup> They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. <sup>37</sup> Altogether there were 276 of us on board. <sup>38</sup> When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea.

AC 27:39 When daylight came, they did not recognize the land, but they saw a bay with a sandy beach, where they decided to run the ship aground if they could. <sup>40</sup> Cutting loose the anchors, they left them in the sea and at the same time untied the ropes that held the rudders. Then they hoisted the foresail to the wind and made for the beach. <sup>41</sup> But the ship struck a sandbar and ran aground. The bow stuck fast and would not move, and the stern was broken to pieces by the pounding of the surf.

AC 27:42 The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. <sup>43</sup> But the centurion wanted to spare Paul's life and kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. <sup>44</sup> The rest were to get there on planks or on pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land in safety.

Now isn't this an interesting Thanksgiving Feast. After 2 weeks, 14 long days, in a violent storm so severe that almost everyone had just given up hope of living, Paul wants to have a Thanksgiving Feast. He takes the little food that is left, and he gives thanks to God for it, and he eats himself and encourages others to eat along with him.

Now there are 3 observations which we see in the text as we look at how Paul responded to this terrifying intrusion into his life, this storm which was threatening his very life:

1. First, we see from Paul's example that it is possible to give thanks even during turbulent times in our lives.

The Apostle was in dire straights when he proposed this thanksgiving feast. 276 human lives were hanging in the balance. Yet Paul was able to suggest and practice thanksgiving because he was basing his gratitude on the promises of God rather than on his life situation. God had promised Paul deliverance. God had revealed his plan for Paul's life - that Paul was destined to stand before Caesar. So Paul had the courage to be thankful even in the midst of a life-threatening situation.

We need to be reminded that the foundation for any thanksgiving is the word and promise of God. If we base our thanksgiving on the promises of God, then we will always have a solid foundation for gratitude. For God's promises are fresh and new every morning. Some of God's most precious promises are only realized during the storms of life. Who of us hasn't experienced God's presence and strength and comfort in a special way during some time of trouble? God has promised never to leave us nor forsake us. God has promised to give strength to those who wait upon Him. God has promised to meet all of our needs. Too often, we associate Thanksgiving with pleasant experiences to the degree that we base our gratitude on those pleasant life-situations. When we fall into that danger trap, we give a foothold to the enemy. For he then knows that he can quench our thankful heart by bringing a dark cloud into our life.

Paul's thankful heart was not based upon the size of the waves around him

for he proposed this thanksgiving feast in the middle of a storm. Rather, Paul's thankful heart was founded on the promises that God had given to him.

2. But we must see something further of the nature of Paul's thanksgiving. Paul was not only thankful for what God had done, but he was also giving thanks for what God was going to do in the future.

It is right and proper for us to be thankful for what God has done in our lives. The Bible commands us to remember the good things that God has done and be thankful for them. How often were the Israelites rebuked for their tendency to forget God's deliverance from Egypt, to forget God's parting the Red Sea, to forget the water and manna feasts in the desert. We should express gratitude to God for all that He has done for us in the past.

But we must not stop there. We must also reach forward in faith to what God has promised to do in the future and thank God for what He is going to do as if it were already accomplished. This is faith. And that is exactly what Paul does here. Paul proposes a thanksgiving feast to celebrate the fact that they were about to be delivered from this storm and not one person would lose his life. Now the hardened sailors did not feel very safe. They felt very much endangered by the raging storm that they had endured for 2 weeks. But Paul assured them of their safety because of God's word and promise to them. So Paul thanked God in advance for what he was going to do.

It is accepted etiquette to thank someone for an act of kindness. How much more should common courtesy thank God for all of the blessings that He has bestowed in the past. But faith allows us to not just stop with thanksgiving

for past blessings. As Christians, we are even able to thank God for what He has promised to do in the future just as if it had already been accomplished. For God's promises never fail. God has never reneged on one of his promises. As we rejoice in what has promised to do for us in the future, this brings great anticipation and hope into our lives.

3. In the third place, notice the result of Paul's spirit of thanksgiving. His gratitude towards God brought encouragement and strength not only into his own life, but to others as well.

READ ACTS 27:35,36

<sup>35</sup> After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. <sup>36</sup> They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves.

What an unusual thanksgiving service! We can almost envision the crusty and weary sailors who had battled this storm for 14 days. Most had come to the place where they had lost all hope of survival. Now, with their spirits broken, they see this single man who has a thankful heart towards God. And an amazing thing begins to happen. Paul's thanksgiving begins to bring new hope and courage to their hearts. They are encouraged to the thought that maybe they will be saved, maybe they will survive after all. They eat and drink. They began to talk about future plans with one another. The storm is still raging about them. The situation is just as bleak as it has always been from a human standpoint. But the thankful heart of one prisoner has brought renewed courage to all.

But we must not stop with the example of the Apostle Paul. For I said near the beginning of my sermon that we were going to look at 2 examples this morning. And the second servant of God sadly did not exhibit the same heart of gratitude that Paul did.

Turn to Jonah 1 with me.

Now we find a strikingly similar scene here. Jonah, the prophet of God, is in a ship which is in the midst of a storm. It was very likely in the same general area as Paul's ship was. For Paul was traveling from Israel to Rome; Jonah planned to travel from Israel to Tarshish or Spain on the other side of Rome. So Jonah was in the same general area as Paul would be in almost 1,000 years later. Both of these storm were so severe that the experienced sailors were terrified, brought to wit's end. In both cases, the Bible says that the sailors tossed the cargo overboard in a desperate attempt to prevent the ship's sinking. When you consider the fact that carrying cargo was the whole purpose of the voyage and that there was no insurance or financial protection in these days, you can see the desperation of throwing the cargo overboard. In essence, the entire trip was suddenly a waste of time, and even worse than that, a loss of great financial capital. But Jonah's response is far different from Paul's isn't it?

Notice it with me as I read.

READ JONAH 1:4-15

JNH 1:4 Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. <sup>5</sup> All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. <sup>6</sup> The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish."

JNH 1:7 Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

JNH 1:8 So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"

JNH 1:9 He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land."

JNH 1:10 This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)

JNH 1:11 The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"

JNH 1:12 "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

JNH 1:13 Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. <sup>14</sup> Then they cried to the LORD, "O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O LORD, have done as you pleased." <sup>15</sup> Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm.

Now in spite of the similarities, there are some obvious differences between Paul and Jonah's scenes, aren't there? Whereas the apostle Paul was traveling from Israel to Rome in the center of God's will, Jonah was traveling from Israel to Tarshish in an attempt to run away from the will of God. Both of them knew

what God wanted them to do for God had revealed it to them. But Jonah, unlike Paul, had chosen to disobey the command of God.

And the differences in the personal responses of Paul and Jonah reveal themselves in the opposite attitudes that they exhibit, don't they? Whereas Paul proposed a thanksgiving feast in his stormy situation exemplifying hope for the future, Jonah models a sullen apathy exemplifying despair for the future. Just throw me overboard into the sea, Jonah advises. Just end it all, Jonah recommends in his suicidal despair. For Jonah fully expected that he would drown in the sea. How could he have ever envisioned deliverance way out in the Mediterranean Sea in the middle of a violent storm? Certainly Jonah never imagined being saved by a great fish in his wildest dreams. No, Jonah was ready to end it all. His rebellion against God and His will had filled his heart with anger against God instead of thanksgiving. And that had resulted in despair instead of hope. Jonah didn't look forward in faith to a bright future that God had planned for him. Jonah just wanted to end his life instead. And the result was confusion and guilt in the lives of the sailors. Whereas Paul's companions were encouraged and filled with hope, Jonah's companions were discouraged and filled with guilt. They tried their best to row and battle the storm so that they wouldn't have to drop Jonah into the sea. But finally, in their desperation, they saw no other alternative. So, exhausted physically and drained emotionally, they pitched Jonah into the water pleading with God not to hold them accountable for taking the prophet's life.

Now from a human standpoint, we can understand the emotions that Jonah

was dealing with here for it is difficult to go through a stormy time in life. We have all been in violent storms of life when the whole world seemed to be crashing in around us, and we have all faced the temptation to throw in the towel and quit. It is not the norm to propose a thanksgiving feast during the storm as Paul did. It is rather natural to become apathetic and angry like Jonah did.

But you will recall that earlier in the sermon I mentioned the importance of maintaining thanksgiving during the storms of life because the attitudes that we choose during these strategic times often follow us to the calmer periods of our life. The quality of our life overall is often determined by our response during the storms of life. And I want to conclude by illustrating this principle from the lives of our 2 examples this morning.

Since we are in Jonah already, let's consider his continuing example first. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> chapters, we are introduced to a very different scene. Jonah is no longer in a stormy situation in life. In fact, Jonah has now experienced one of the greatest blessings that any prophet of God could ever have. Jonah has marched into Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, and he has preached a message from God - and everyone has believed it and repented from sin and turned to God.

READ Jonah 3:4,5 - "On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed, 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned'. The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth."

Now this is amazing. It could be argued that Jonah had the privilege of leading the greatest revival that the world has ever seen here. I don't know of another illustration in all of human history where the capital city of a world-wide empire had such a spiritual awakening that everyone turned from sin to God. You would think that Jonah's heart would be filled to the brim and overflowing with joy and thanksgiving to God, wouldn't you? You would think that Jonah would be filled with hope for the future. After all, if God could do such a miraculous work in the hearts and lives of these pagan Assyrians, what people anywhere would be outside the realm of His influence. But notice Jonah's response that is recorded in the first verse of chapter 4: "But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry." Instead of being filled with hope for the future, Jonah was filled again with despair. Notice verse 3, "Now, O Lord, take away me life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

You see, the same pattern of thanksgiving that Jonah developed during the turbulent times of his life followed him into the times of life that should have been filled with peace and joy. Now Jonah did have times of thanksgiving in his life. We looked during our Praise Service last Sunday evening at a snapshot of Jonah in the belly of the great fish in chapter 2. In the midst of his discomfort, Jonah did express some thanksgiving to God and this became a turning point for him as he was soon delivered from the belly of the fish. And Jonah did write the short prophetic book that bears his name. This would imply continued ministry on his part. And there are, of course, some historical reasons for Jonah's feelings that we don't have time to deal with this morning.

But from what we know of Jonah's life, mainly through the book that he wrote, the prophet didn't consistently maintain an attitude of thanksgiving, but often gave in to the temptation to be angry and sullen and ungrateful. This pattern of life even followed him from the stormy times when we might expect it to the prosperous times when there was no reason for it.

Now, again, contrast Jonah's example with the Apostle Paul. We know from history that Paul did arrive in Rome and that he served a period of time in house arrest. During this house arrest, life became more normal for Paul again. He was allowed to live in a home, have friends come to visit him, and correspond with churches. One of the letters that Paul wrote during this time was the Epistle to the church at Philippi. Listen to what he wrote to the Philippian believers. "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength." Phil. 4:11b-13. Quite a contrast to Jonah, isn't it?

You see, thanksgiving is a life-style. It is a way of life. It is not something that we can turn on the fourth Thursday of November and then forget about the rest of the year. Thanksgiving must permeate every aspect of our lives. If we choose to be generally thankful when things are going our way, then we probably will also be able to choose a thankful spirit during difficult periods of life as well though it will be much more difficult. And if we learn to be consistently thankful during the storms of life, then we very likely will be

able to be thankful during the more peaceful times as well.

So then, Paul and Jonah would represent 2 ways to ride out storms in life. Paul represents the thankful choice that claims the promises and God and results in hope and encouragement for the future. Jonah represents the selfish choice that ignores the Word of God and results in despair and apathy in the future. Which choices are you consistently making in your life?