

## **How to Live Like a Christian When the Storm Hits**

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Rich Nathan

February 7-8, 2004

2 Timothy: Passing on the Faith

2 Timothy 2:8-26

Last summer, my wife and I drove to Florida where my dad owns a condo. Two times, first on the way down and then again on the way back, we hit one of those tropical storms as we drove on the highway. It was unlike anything that we experience here in Ohio. The rain came down and hit our windshield like a fire hose. We were talking, listening to a book on tape, enjoying each other's company, when all of a sudden it was like our car drove into a car wash. The rain was so heavy that no matter how fast my windshield wipers were moving, they couldn't remove the water fast enough.

Have you ever experienced that? Driving on the highway absolutely blind? I couldn't see five feet ahead of me. I couldn't see the lane markers, the cars in front of me. Fortunately, everyone turned on their lights.

Have you ever been driving and suddenly encounter a thick fog, or rainstorm, or blizzard, something that absolutely blinded you? What did you do?

I'll tell you what I did. First of all, my adrenal glands pumped about 2-3 quarts of adrenalin through my body. I gripped the steering wheel for dear life. I left my fingerprints on the steering wheel. I turned on my headlights and my warning flashers. I slowed down to a crawl and prayed that I wouldn't get hit from behind or hit someone ahead. I turned off the radio and absolutely stopped talking. I was totally focused simply on the task of staying alive and staying in my lane. It definitely wasn't the time for chitchatting with Marlene, or talking on my cell phone. I just wanted to stay alive, stay in my lane, and not crash into something.

I thought about this image of trying to drive in a tropical rainstorm as I reflected on the state of our country and what it is like to try to be a true follower of Christ at this particular moment in history. Think about just a few of the cultural events that hit your windshield just this past week. The downpour was so sudden, and the moral lane markers got so blurred that even those who say they are committed to Christ are confused, discouraged, and unclear about what to do.

We've been engaged for a week in a national discussion about what is appropriate for family entertainment. Here are some of the largest and most powerful corporations in America that are designed to produce entertainment – CBS, the NFL and MTV. It's hard to believe that anyone with any degree of moral sensitivity thought that apart from the last few seconds of the Super Bowl halftime show, the rest of the show was appropriate for a mainstream audience made up of 8-year old girls, 85-year old WWII veterans, kids watching with their

parents and everyone in between? There doesn't seem to be any bottom to pop culture. Year by year America sinks to new lows, and we all get accustomed to living at a lower level.

Do you know one of the major reasons the Muslim world hates America? It is because in their eyes we are a nation of utter degenerates. We fill the airwaves and the Internet with pornography. In fact, America is, by far, the world's largest exporter of pornography. When much of the world thinks of America, it does not immediately say, "America, the land of the free, home of the brave, a city shining on a hill, the last best hope for humanity." Instead, around the world, the popular perception of America is "America, the land of gas-guzzling, air polluting, global warming, monster SUV's – America the obese, America the purveyor of pornography and violence."

Without beating a dead horse, consider the halftime show that was watched by a billion people around the world. This was the quintessential American experience viewed all around the world, our Super Bowl. There was a singer wearing an American flag in which he had cut a hole. He was wearing the American flag as a poncho, the flag for which many Americans have died. The singer was screaming undecipherable words about easy women and using drugs. In back of him there were several women wearing practically nothing, waving American flags. As one editorial writer so aptly put it, "Osama bin Laden, himself, couldn't have written a better script on American culture."

And then, this past week, the windshield of Americans was hit with another fire hose, as the Massachusetts Supreme Court declared that it was unconstitutional under the Massachusetts Constitution for gays to be denied the right to marry. This will certainly result in a major constitutional test case concerning whether other states must recognize the validity of gay marriages performed in Massachusetts.

Here in Ohio, the legislature recently passed a Defense of Marriage Act, which was just signed by Governor Taft yesterday. Governor Taft faced a great deal of opposition in signing this bill. He received a massive number of phone calls opposing his signature. For your convenience, on the screens, we're putting up the Governor's number:

It might be helpful if 4000-5000 of us expressed a positive opinion concerning this very important piece of legislation.

But the truth is, friends, your car windshield and that of your children and teens have been blasted by a moral tropical storm for many years. As I said before, even followers of Christ are confused about where the lane markers are. Lots of folks declare themselves to be Christians and then have car wrecks, not because they are necessarily bad people, but they simply can't handle what the world is throwing at them. Or their children can't handle it.

As we continue in this study of Paul's second letter to Timothy, I want to talk about how to live as a Christian when the storm hits. And by the storm, I don't mean simply personal difficulty, or painful circumstances. I particularly mean the seemingly overwhelming power of the moral flood of this culture. Let's pray.

### **2 Timothy 2:8-13**

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.

As you consider the moral storm that has hit our country, how does it make you feel? For those of you who are followers of Christ, as you flip through the stations on your remote controls on your TVs, as you go to a video store and look over the titles and pictures on the DVDs, as you pick up your daily newspapers and read about what's going on around you, how do these developments make you feel? Do you feel discouraged? Do you feel depressed? Do you feel like the wind is out of your sails? Maybe the best thing would be to buy some land up in Idaho or in Montana and escape the big bad world? As one person put it the other day, "Rich, are we on the Titanic? Is this ship going down?"

I want you to see the attitude that the apostle Paul had concerning the storm that he faced in his day. Read what he says:

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel for which I am suffering, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's Word is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

Consider, for a moment, the Apostle Paul's circumstances when he wrote these words. He was in chains, convicted as a criminal for preaching the gospel. He had gone through a preliminary hearing and he was about to face final sentencing, in which a full Roman court would pronounce a death sentence over his life. So, Paul's in prison and he's facing a virtually certain death sentence.

But that's not the worst of it. The worst of it is he's watching his life's work evaporate around him. There are massive defections happening in the churches that he's planted. People are leaving the church, going back to their old Roman ways. Many church leaders are preaching heresy in the church. The people are becoming increasingly confused about what true Christianity is. Some were

denying a future resurrection of the dead. The Roman Empire was never stronger. Popular entertainment involved watching men, women and children herded into an arena to be devoured by wild animals, or hacked to death by gladiators.

And in the midst of the storm, the moral storm and the spiritual storm that was hitting Paul full force, he is filled with wild optimism regarding the future of the planet, and specifically the future of the Christian. This optimism regarding planet Earth and the future of the Christian faith is not rooted in positive thinking. It is not based on Paul's generally optimistic temperament. It is not based on years of training himself, denying reality, or closing his eyes to the moral decay. Instead, Paul's optimism is grounded in the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead – The entrance of the Kingdom of God through Jesus Christ, and the unbeatable, irresistible power of the Word of God.

Look at this with me. Paul says:

Remember Jesus Christ raised from the dead.

Whatever you are facing, whatever the discouraging circumstances are of your life, remember Jesus Christ raised from the dead. Call to mind, hold in view, meditate on, and think about what happened on Easter morning. Consider the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead. If Christ could overcome death, and Satan, and sin, and hell, he can overcome the power of MTV, and a few members of the Massachusetts Supreme Court, and whatever else hits our moral windshield.

But not only is Christ raised from the dead, Paul says remember he is also descended from David. God promised the Old Testament King David that one of his descendents would set up a worldwide kingdom that would last forever. The descendent who did that was Jesus of Nazareth. God has been working in history to establish his reign over billions of people's lives. Through Jesus, Paul is optimistic because he knows what happens when formerly immoral, addicted and confused people submit to God. Paul goes on to say that he may be in chains in a Roman prison, but he is optimistic.

But God's Word is not chained.

In other words, Paul knew the irresistible power of God's Word to transform people's lives and to transform society. Nothing can imprison God's Word. It is stronger than secularism. It is stronger than Hollywood. God's Word is stronger than the court system. Beyond that, God has purposed to save people. Paul said,

Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

God desires to save people. In love he has chosen not to leave this world or our country to work things out for ourselves. God, in grace, fortunately doesn't simply turn his back on us. God is actively working to rescue our country as we share our faith.

Let me ask you some questions. As you look out on this world, doesn't it sometimes depress you to listen to the conversations in your work place? Do you get discouraged, as you have to delete the crazy ads that pop up on your computer screen when you look at your email each morning? Do you fear for your children? For your grandchildren? Here's a way to encourage yourself when you get depressed about the state of this world. Friend, call to mind the not-to-be-defeated God. Do you "Remember Jesus Christ raised from the dead?" His Word is unstoppable.

Not only is God the not-to-be-defeated God, but to borrow a phrase from a wonderful devotional writer, J. Oswald Sanders, God is the undiscourageable God. Paul quotes the words that many people believe came from an ancient hymn.

Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.

There is a sharp warning for people, who are hit with a storm in verse 12:

If we disown him, he will disown us.

If believers do not endure and if we leave Christ and reject him, then before the Judgment Seat, Christ will say, "Depart from me, I never knew you." It is required of the Christian to persevere. We must hold on to Christ and follow him in order to be saved.

But you say, "Rich, there have been times when I got knocked off my feet by the power of the storm. My children have gotten knocked off their feet. I've driven out of my lane. Sometimes I feel like I'm blinded and I can't see."

Paul ends the hymn with a great promise; it is a promise filled with optimism.

If we are faithless, he remains faithful.

It is wonderful to remember that God doesn't give our country or us what we deserve. There is a precious word that we Christians have. The word is "Grace." God not only doesn't give us what we deserve, he gives us more than we

deserve and better than we deserve. J. Oswald Sanders described God as the undiscourageable God.

Back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a man named Francis Thompson, who because of his alcoholism ended up homeless, sleeping outside by the River Thames in London. He had lost his childhood faith. He became what, in those days would have been called a drunken bum. But he was saved by God's grace. And you ask, "How was Francis Thompson saved from that condition?" He wrote a famous poem titled "The Hound of Heaven." Here's how the poem begins:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways  
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears  
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.  
Up vistaed hopes I sped;  
And shot, precipitated,  
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,  
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.

God doesn't give up on us. God doesn't get discouraged. Perhaps you have a child that is wandering from God. You've prayed for them and prayed for them. But nothing seems to be turning around. You get weary. You get discouraged. But the Hound of Heaven, he never grows weary or gets discouraged. Perhaps you have a parent, a coworker, a dear friend, who you have prayed for for years. Remember the undiscourageable Hound of Heaven. God is chasing after them as you pray. God will keep pursuing and pursuing and pursuing.

Some of you have run from God for decades. You can hear the footsteps of God drawing near; yet you run from him. Today you can turn around and meet the one who loves you and has been faithful to you even when you have been faithless.

Our faithlessness, friends, can cause great pain to ourselves. It can cause great pain to our spouses. By our faithlessness, we can cause pain to our parents. We hurt our friends. We can hurt God. But God keeps pursuing. He's faithful. His love is enduring. He is the Hound of Heaven. That's why Paul was optimistic. Because he had a deep faith in a God who could not be defeated and he had faith in a God who could not be discouraged. Is that your faith?

Now, the Bible sharpens distinctions in a world that blurs them. It is interesting when you read the scripture how often the Bible presents two alternative ways of life. For example, at the end of the book of Deuteronomy, Moses speaks to the Israelites and says:

I have set before you life and death; blessing and curse. Choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God by obeying his way and holding fast to him.

Jesus gives us clear lane markers that we can see two great alternatives when we're facing the storms of life. He tells us that there are two roads you can travel on in doing life. One is the broad road, which many people are on. It's the popular road – The one that commercials and advertisers and media sell. Do life your own way or on your own terms. But it leads to destruction. The other is a narrow road, it is harder, and fewer people are on it. It is an unpopular road. It is the one that says to do life God's way. Do life on God's terms. But it leads to life. The Bible continually presents us with two sharply distinguished alternatives in living.

And the apostle Paul does that using three pictures here in 2 Timothy 2. In the midst of the storm that he was facing, a storm of defections from the faith, and the power of Roman culture, and his own imminent death, Paul tells Timothy, "Timothy, here are some lane markers." Here are the three contrasting pictures, in quick succession. First, he uses the alternatives of the good and bad workman, verse 14:

Keep reminding them of these things. Warn them before God against quarrelling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

Paul tells us two things about the good workman. First of all, the good workman needs to present himself as one approved. That word "approved" literally means "tested" the way that gold would be tested in a fire. The genuineness of metal would be approved or tested by putting it in a fire and having the dross or the foreign elements boil off so that what was left was pure gold.

A Christian proves to be a good workman by being tested and by being tried in the fire and enduring. Friend, the fact that you are going through the fire now at work, the fact that you are experiencing great pain in a relationship, the fact that you have had something very hurtful done to you, or said to you, the fact that you have gotten a really nasty email, or had an extremely uncomfortable phone conversation, or received an unjust criticism, does not mean that you have been a bad workman. So many times we Christians think that if we're experiencing great trials, or we're really undergoing tremendous testing, it must be because we messed up.

- "I must have done something wrong."
- "I must have offended God."
- "This trial has been sent by the enemy. This is spiritual warfare."
- "I need to be delivered. I need to rebuke the devil."

The very best workmen for God are often tested most severely – Abraham, Daniel, and the apostle Paul. God tests his favorites. He sometimes tests his best friends the most, in order to perfect us. His goal in our lives in testing us, in putting us in the fire, in causing us to undergo trials, is always to purify us. God's goal in your life, if you are one of his children, is always to produce good in you. It is always so that you will live a fuller life, a better life, a more joyful life. God desires to bless you.

And if you are in the fire, friend, it doesn't mean that you have blown it. Of course, that's always a possibility. We should examine ourselves. A little bit of introspection, a little bit of self-examination is a good thing. But being thrown in the fire like Daniel's friends were in the Old Testament book of Daniel, the fact that you've been for some period of time in the fiery furnace, may simply mean that you are a good worker. Someone that God is approving of, someone that he's testing.

And the good worker is not only someone who is tested and who passes the test by continuing to love and trust God, but a good worker is someone who correctly handles the word of truth, verse 15:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

That little phrase, "correctly handles," would more literally be translated "cuts straight." The picture is of a civil engineer, who cuts a road absolutely straight so that a traveler can get most directly to their destination. Here's the idea; when you are in a storm and you can hardly see five feet in front of you, and the lane markers are really fuzzy, how do you stay on the road? I'll tell you what I did. I followed the flashing taillights of a truck in front of me. I had guidance outside of myself, outside of my own judgment, and outside of my own intuition. I followed the flashing lights and I made it safely through the storm.

Paul asks, "How are you going to make it through the storms of life?" By handling the Word of God correctly. By cutting a straight path through the word, not deviating to the left or to the right. You see, I don't think that anyone can make it in today's world without following very closely after the counsel of scripture.

Let me talk straight to you for a moment, if I might. Some of you right now are in the midst of a storm of emotions concerning another person. Maybe you feel like you ought to hook up with someone you aren't married to. You feel this emotional attachment to somebody at work, someone you met online, or someone you met at a bar. You are in an emotional storm feeling a connection, affection, or romance with someone outside the faith, someone who is not a believer. Every message of our culture tells you how could something be wrong



when it feels so right? The culture is pulling you off the road. Or maybe in your case you are alienated from someone. And the message of the culture is, "Forget about them. Write them off. Have nothing to do with someone who hurt you."

Especially in a storm, the worse thing you can do, friend, is to rely simply on your own feelings. Especially in a storm, a storm of emotions, a storm of cultural messages, the worse thing you can do is to try to figure out your own way in life. Just like I needed flashing lights from a truck up ahead to guide me through the storm, all of us need an external guidance system, something that goes beyond American culture. We need something that goes beyond our own emotions, our own judgments, and our own thoughts. We need the Word of God to safely guide us through, friends. Especially in times of storms, in times of great stress, do you say to yourself, "You know, I can't figure out my direction on my own? I've tried in the past. I've gone off the road. I've crashed and burned. I can't figure life out on my own. I'm not that smart."

Do you ever say, "I'm driving blind right now? I'm in a storm of my own emotions and feelings. I'm humble enough to admit that I may be getting it wrong in this relationship. I may be getting it wrong in this feeling, and in this attitude. I'm humble enough to admit that I may be wrong. I may be absolutely morally confused by what's right and wrong because of all these messages I'm getting from the culture. My only hope is to submit myself to the Word of God. It is the straight path through."

One of the most effective Christians in the last 100 years is the evangelist Billy Graham. Do you know what the secret to Graham's effectiveness is? It isn't that he's so marvelously gifted, or that he can connect with audiences. When Billy Graham was a young man, he was in a state of great confusion. He was wrestling with lots of big questions that he couldn't answer. A very smart colleague told him that all this stuff about Christianity was all myth, or could be humanly explained away. In a storm of confusion one afternoon, Billy Graham went out into the woods. He took his Bible and opened it up and placed it on a tree stump in the woods. And he knelt down before the Bible and he prayed this way:

He said, "God, there's a lot of things I don't understand. There are a lot of questions that I have about life. There are a lot of places where my mind may be playing tricks on me. But Lord, I'm choosing to believe that this is your Word. And that if I obey your Word life will go well for me. And so from this moment on, God, I'm going to submit my life to what you say in the Bible." Billy Graham said that that was the turning point of his life.

Have you ever done that? Have you knelt down in front of an open Bible and said, "I don't understand it all. I don't get it all. From this moment on though, I'm going to submit my life to the teaching of the Bible?"

The Christian witness is not only a good workman; the Christian witness is also a noble vessel. Paul writes in verse 20:

In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work. Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

Paul mentions two types of vessels. In the NIV there are two types of articles. These articles are made of gold and silver, some of wood and clay. Some are for noble purposes; others are for ignoble. The picture Paul is painting again is of two alternative ways of life for the Christian witness. Our aim is to be a vessel made of gold or silver that might be used for celebrating a wedding, or a Waterford crystal wine glass. When he speaks of vessels made for ignoble purposes, he's actually referring to something like a chamber pot, what we today would call a toilet.

If you want to be a Christian witness, be a good worker. Submit to God's Word in your life. If you want to be a Christian witness, be a holy vessel. You know, I've been talking in this series about extending the faith, sharing your faith, inviting people to church, praying for coworkers and not giving up, praying for relatives and not giving up. I know that when I start talking about sharing our faith, there are many of you who immediately disqualify yourselves and you simply say, "That's not something I can do. It is not my gift. I'm not an evangelist. I'm not that bold."

Listen to me now. Words are a part of our witness. But they are only a part. The most important part of your witness at your school, in your workplace, or in your family concerns the quality of life that you live. Witnessing is not something you do, it is something you are. When I went to college, I was a Jewish atheist with very little interest in God. The reason why I began to consider whether there might be a God who had something to do with me was because of the impact of the life of a woman named Marlene. Not her words, but I was so struck by meeting a woman who was so obviously living a better life than me. The only way to describe my feelings around her was that I finally met a person who was clean, not self-righteous, but clean. She had a clean mouth. She didn't go around cursing or gossiping like other girls. She was clean sexually. She didn't keep fudging the lines. She was clean in her handling of relationships. She had an attractive life. She was one of those vessels that had been cleaned up.

I want to share with you a brief video clip from a member of our congregation, Nick Ciccone. Nick was out of church for 26 years. Even when he was a child, he was raised nominally Catholic. He completely left church when he went to

college. He pretty much dismissed God, at least in terms of having any personal relationship with God, or believing that God had any relevance for his life. Listen to Nick as he talks about the impact of meeting one of our church members at a health club.

You know, there are so many people like Nick around you. Folks who are asking the question, Is there anyone here who notices me? Anyone who cares about me? Single people who say, "If I was to die, would anyone miss me?" Married people who say, "I don't feel loved. I don't feel cared for by anyone or anything."

You know, friend, we have an opportunity to be used by God in a wonderful way. The fact is, God will use you. You have a choice regarding how you will be used. There are two great alternatives. You can be used as a Waterford crystal goblet for noble purposes, helping other people find a better way of life, assisting folks to find their way to Christ, being an encourager, being a lover, being a mercy extender. You can be a Waterford crystal goblet, or (and I say this with all affection), you can be used as a toilet. You can allow so much junk and garbage to accumulate in your life that you lose the power to impact other people's lives for good. You get to determine what is on your tombstone, friend. "Here lies a beautiful cut-glass Waterford crystal goblet, continually used by God to bring blessing to other people," or "Here lies a toilet, a life that was just filled with garbage."

Friend, if you feel like you are just stuffed full of garbage – garbage relationships, bad attitudes, and bad choices – today you can turn around. Paul says

If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.

By coming to Christ, by coming to the cross, you can cleanse yourself so that you are no longer (and again I say this with all affection) a toilet. You can become transformed into a Waterford crystal goblet.

The last alternative picture that God gives us is between the gentle and the quarrelsome servant, verse 23:

Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments because you know they produce quarrels and the Lord's servant must not quarrel. Instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.

Last thought: You know, effective Christian witnesses are folks who submit themselves to God's Word. They cut it straight. Effective Christian witnesses are people who have cleaned the garbage out of their lives. They've decided to live for the Lord. And effective Christian witnesses also manifest a gentleness and graciousness toward people, even people that you strongly disagree with.

Years ago there was a Christian who used to go around the country debating the atheist, Madeline Murray O'Hare, and his style was always slashing, demeaning, condescending, making sarcastic remarks to her. Christians in the audience spoke to him and talked with him about his manner. Unfortunately, this man said, "I did not come to save souls. I came to destroy an atheist."

If you seek to extend the faith, pray for gentleness. Pray for graciousness. Pray for the capacity of other people to experience the love of Christ through you. We have so many reasons to be hopeful for our country and for the people around us. God can't be discouraged. God can't be defeated. Keep praying, keep sharing. Let's pray.

## **How to Live Like a Christian When the Storm Hits**

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Rich Nathan

February 7-8, 2004

2 Timothy: Passing on the Faith

2 Timothy 2:8-26

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