

A Voice in the Wind

A Personal Story by Wm. Paul Franks

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It has been over a year since a course of events began that would forever change my life, and the lives of many others around me. It was the second week of May and the pastor at my church decided to take the staff on a much-needed retreat. The staff gathered together after the Sunday morning service, made last minute arrangements, and headed off towards Lake Meade, Nevada. No one had any idea that the budding friendships between new staff members and old, along with excited conversation about the week's plans, would soon come to focus on one tragic event.

“So we'll go ahead in the ski boat to meet everyone else at the other dock, and then we'll all double back to reunite with the you guys on the houseboat.” I said casually to our children's pastor, one of the newer members on staff. That was the plan and it seemed like a good one. Just the night before I had the opportunity to sit with his son, Derrick, and learn a little more about Metro Kidz Ministries and this crazy family that had devoted their entire lives to reaching children. I knew Derrick for a while, but with the busyness of life and ministry, we never really got to know much about one another. As we talked that night, I couldn't help but recognize that in so many ways he embodied what it means to be “sold out” for Christ. This guy, like his parents, devoted his entire life to children's ministry and only thought about reaching children, no matter where they were from. Before leaving the marina, Derrick volunteered to go in the ski boat with me. As we left the marina, I remember thinking to myself that this could be the first of many adventures with a new friend and colleague.

The ski boat and houseboat launched out of the marina around 9:00 am not knowing that the infamous Lake Meade winds would soon close the lake to other boats not long after our

departure. We playfully followed the houseboat for about half an hour trying to retrieve a couple of pairs of sunglasses that were inadvertently lost overboard. After many unsuccessful attempts, we gave up and headed off. Things were going well for a good while when, out of nowhere, the winds began to pick up dramatically causing 5 to 6 foot swells. We both knew that things were not looking good and after a few moments of discussion, decided to turn around and hook back up with the houseboat. Not knowing exactly what we would do once we got there, we both had confidence that Derrick's father would know the best course of action.

Shortly after turning back north towards the direction of the houseboat, a large wave unexpectedly rose up beneath us and caused the ski boat to slide downwards nose first into another large wave in front of it. As the nose plunged in, the water came over the top of the boat and threw us overboard. I remember the water being so cold that we could hardly whisper when asking if each other was okay. The boat was now barely floating with only the top couple of inches above water. Derrick reached inside and threw me a life jacket, and then put one on himself. (From talking to so many of his friends and family, this 'think of others first' attitude was no stranger to him.) As we were floating beside the boat, we realized the now underwater gas tanks were leaking. The gas mixed with the lake water and caused such an unbearable burning sensation that we knew we had to get away from the boat, but also felt it important to stay nearby.

I found a ski rope and tied it to the back of the boat and then we swam as far away as we could. We knew that the houseboat was still behind us and that if we stayed calm until it came by, everything would turn out fine. After what seemed like an eternity, a wave large enough to lift us over the others allowed us to catch a glimpse of what we thought was the houseboat. We weren't sure if it was *our* houseboat, but we didn't care. We just wanted someone that could help. Another

wave came along and then we were certain that we did see a boat, but by this time it was much closer and we weren't sure if they would see the ski boat or us. I mentioned to Derrick that we should use the ski rope and pull ourselves back to the boat, but Derrick thought the houseboat was too close and there wasn't enough time to get back before they crossed our paths. He said he was going to try and swim toward the boat and I began using the ski rope to pull myself back to the ski boat.

Sadly, Derrick was right, just as I stood up inside the almost completely underwater boat and began waving my arms, I saw the houseboat go by. I was certain they didn't see me. I began yelling for Derrick, but the winds howled so loudly that I'm sure my voice didn't carry much beyond my face. This ski boat's engine was positioned in the center of the boat and I hopelessly sat down its cover. As I tried to stay centered on the ski boat and prevent it from capsizing, I furiously scanned the water in hopes of seeing Derrick making his way back. After several hours of being pushed along by the waves, I knew that he wasn't going to be back and increased my prayers that he would make it to the shore quickly and safely. My prayers that day were frequent and furious. How could God allow this to happen? Why hadn't anyone else come along? If Jesus had the ability to calm the storm, and God is the same today as yesterday, then why wouldn't he answer my prayer and calm *this* storm? I have never experienced such a range of emotions. I feared for my life, and for Derrick's even more so. It was all too unreal.

Eventually the ski boat crashed into the rock beach of what turns out to be Ramshead Island. I just got out of the boat and was struggling onto land when a wave came and threw the boat against my back. I thought for sure something was going to be broken, but fortunately I was wrong and made it out safely. As soon as I got on land I rushed up the small cliff in hopes of

seeing someone on the other side. Like so many times before, my hopes were crushed when I didn't see anything but water and empty land. The wind was so severe atop the cliff that I could not stand up and had to crawl back down. Once the descent was finished, I began to pray once again. While praying, I tried to collect the things that were washing ashore from the now broken apart ski boat. As night began to fall, I prayed (even envisioned in my mind) that Derrick was making his way right then to someone that could help.

That winds blowing that night on my sunburned skin were so cold that, for the first time, I truly felt I was not going to live. I used two washed up life jackets as blankets and a third for a pillow, but they were minimally effective to say the least. The night was so clear and there were so many stars out. I asked God how, if he could make all these wonderful stars, he couldn't have brought along someone to help us. Eventually the wind subsided, my shivering stopped, and I took the long-awaited silence as an opportunity to try calling for Derrick again. I yelled for him until my voice was sore. I heard no response, but still believed he was just too far off to respond. Night eventually subsided and morning came.

As the sun began to rise the next morning, I noticed that every few minutes a boat would pass by the island. I shouted and waved, but was on the wrong side of the island and the boaters had their backs to me as they went by. Finally, a fisherman was on his way back to the marina when he saw me trying to wave down yet another boat. He approached the island and I slowly waded out to meet him. I couldn't believe that after almost 24 hours, someone was finally around to help. The gruff fisherman didn't seem too interested in my story, he seemed only focused on getting me to back to the marina. As soon as I stepped off his boat, there were people with a lot of questions. The authorities had been looking all morning for Derrick and me. Evidently, the

houseboat never met up with everyone else and the lake's location prevented the cell phones from working properly. Both groups thought that Derrick and I were at the opposite location. It wasn't until morning came that they realized we were at neither. I got on the phone with the search team and was so disappointed when the man told me they still hadn't found Derrick. I told them where we went down and where they could start looking.

I wanted to go back out and help with the search, but they assured me that I had given them enough information over the phone and I needed medical attention. As much as I fought it, I finally fell asleep during the ride to the hospital in Las Vegas. The paramedics had just got me situated in a private area of the emergency room when Marcus our music pastor came in. I was surprised to see him; not remembering anyone's cell numbers, I hadn't had any communication with anyone from the church since we left the marina the prior morning. He asked how I was and I told him I would be fine. That is when he informed me that Derrick had drowned and they found his body. A wave of guilt and regret washed over me stronger than the wave that knocked us out of the boat. I couldn't believe it. It was my fault. I was steering the boat; it was because of me that the accident happened.

As we waited for the hospital staff to administer my tetanus shot all I wanted to do was leave. I didn't care about the shot. I didn't care about getting electrolytes pumped back into my system. I just wanted out. That is when Marcus began speaking life and hope into that room. Even amidst the pain I could feel the Holy Spirit active in my life. The one thing I didn't even want to think about was seeing Derrick's parents and sister. How could I ever face them again? What would they say to me? What could I say to them? I still have difficulty explaining exactly how I felt at that moment. After leaving the hospital, we went back to a hotel and made plans to return to

California the next day. The answers to some of these questions came much sooner than I expected, the very next morning.

I was just finishing breakfast when I saw Derrick's parents walk into the room. My heart began to race and I wanted to run and hide. Bev, his mother, came up to me and gave me a hug. She said, "We're are so happy you're okay." The love I felt in her voice still brings me to tears when I think about it. I knew she meant it. Derrick's father Jeff echoed the same sentiments and seemed so grateful that I was okay. They were glad I was able to relate to them those final moments. They didn't blame me at all. They loved on me and assured me that Derrick had gone home. They showed me love! When they could have faulted me for their son's death, they were thankful I was okay. They reassured me that there was nothing I could've done. It's one thing to tell yourself that, but to hear it from someone who has just lost a son is completely different. This was something far beyond merely saying what you're supposed to say as a Christian. There was an almost tangible feeling to their loving attitude towards me.

The next Sunday night we had a beautiful memorial service for Derrick. It was a difficult time for everyone, but that service showed what a remarkable man Derrick was. God had used him in a tremendous way to touch lives. There were people from all across the nation that came to his service. He is a great example of how God can use one life to change so many. Every time I see a boat in the water, or even being pulled on a trailer, I think of Derrick. It is sometimes easy to begin feeling guilty and responsible, but when I do, I think back to that moment when his parents exemplified what it means to show the love of Christ. If the Church could just *begin* to live in that manner, the impact on our world would be enormous. I know that their love towards me has allowed me to heal much sooner than would have been possible otherwise. In the New Testament

we are called to be different. God asks his Church to stand out from the rest of society. A loving action or attitude will go a long way in a society that is used to being hurt and put down by those around them. The Diltz family has asked God to use this incident to further his purposes and they have shown what a true Christ-like attitude is. I'm certain that God will continue to honor their request. I pray that we all will ask God to equip us with that same loving capacity.

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