

Soul Survivor

I spent 39 days as a participant on the reality show Survivor. I didn't walk away with \$1 million dollars, but I learned some lessons about myself and God.

I was soaked: my pants heavy with water, my shirt clinging tight against my chest. The rain beat down, cold and sharp. As the storm persisted, the ground below me began to flood. I felt puddles rising up over my feet and ankles. The few words exchanged between my sole companion and me were lost in the sound of the wind lashing the trees above us.

Don't let any cynic tell you Survivor isn't real. Such perceptions are held only by those who have never been marooned on an island, left to brave a 24-hour monsoon without shelter.

My name is Austin Carty, and I was a contestant on Survivor: Panama—Exile Island. The moment I just described is real, and it took place on the 20th day of my journey competing on America's favorite reality program.

Though it's been more than two years since my appearance on Survivor, I still remember vividly what it was like leaving for the show and stepping into the unknown. I left my hometown of High Point, North Carolina, in the autumn of 2005 not knowing what to expect.

I knew only one thing for sure. I would be the "Christian character" on Survivor. And though I'd been a believer in Jesus Christ since I was 5, this was a daunting prospect for me.

I felt as if a huge burden were resting on me, as if the fate of the entire Christian faith had suddenly been placed on my shoulders. I remember concocting elaborate ideas for how I could wave the banner of Christ while on TV.

I had grandiose plans to wake each morning and offer a “morning devotional and prayer time” for my fellow castaways. But my plans were overblown, especially since I imagined delivering the devotionals in a sanctimonious manner as the camera’s eye was trained on me.

Fortunately, these showy exhibitions of faith never took place.

The night before I boarded the plane for the unknown, I went to visit my mentor and sounding board—my grandfather. When he hugged me goodbye that night, he began to pray over me. As he lifted his voice to God, he made a request I will never forget: “Lord, let Austin be a strong witness ... not a blatant witness, but a strong witness.”

As Grandpa’s words fell over me, I felt a strengthening in my spirit. I suddenly knew I didn’t need any added ceremony while I was on the show. I knew in that moment that my faith was built upon a solid rock. I felt ready to face whatever trials would come my way.

A day later, on a beach in Panama, I felt as if I were starving.

My experience on Survivor is something I will never forget. Those 39 days of competition—particularly those 36 hours on Exile Island—gave me invaluable insight into my life, my

character, my priorities and my aspirations. But those insights are not what I hold most dear about my time on Survivor.

For me, Survivor was not about 15 minutes of fame (thank God, because those 15 minutes were exhausted long ago), and it was not about trying to win the million-dollar prize. For me, Survivor was about finding out exactly what faith is really about. Not showy faith, but genuine faith. And it wasn't primarily about what I could teach others. God had something to teach me.

Which brings me back to the piercing rain, the howling wind, the wet ground, and the cracking tree branches.

The isolation I felt in that storm was brutal. All across the ocean, lightning cut the sky and thunder boomed, deep and steady overhead.

I curled up in a fetal position, trying to maintain as much body heat as possible. Twenty-four hours we'd been fighting it, and still the storm raged on. The show's producers, wrapped snugly in Columbia raingear, instructed my companion and me to watch for the symptoms of hypothermia.

I had been praying incessantly since the rain began. But as the storm persisted, I began to wonder whether or not my prayers were being heard.

I felt an unfamiliar bitterness and doubt slowly rising up inside me. Was God really listening?

Surrounded by the howl of the storm, I was beleaguered by crazy questions. Is God the loving, benevolent Father I'd always believed Him to be? Doesn't He realize that I'm at my breaking point? I'd earnestly called on Him for help for more than 24 hours, but my pleas had been met only with silence.

I felt my spirit giving way and my emotions taking over.

My first curses came out scarcely above a whisper. As the storm raged on, they became confident sentences. Soon, I was screaming curses at both the weather and God—much like Lt. Dan did when he and Forrest Gump were abandoned at sea amid a violent maelstrom.

During those next several hours I rode a roller coaster of emotions. I went from screaming to praying to cursing to praying, from begging God to make the storm stop to thanking Him for putting me through such a difficult trial, to screaming and, finally, to praying again.

When the morning sun at last began to climb the horizon after nearly 30 hours of misery, I pulled off my soaking wet shirt and felt the heat slowly melt away the nightmare of the night's storm. The goose bumps disappeared from my skin, and my body stopped shaking.

Survivor is a show that pushes you to the limit. It puts you in places you've never been and never wanted to go. In a way, the program is a microcosm of a man's life. There may be times when he wants to quit. But, just as in life, he knows that he cannot.

And so he's forced to fight. And he's forced to pray. And he's

forced to doubt.

And then, finally, he's forced to believe.

When the storm clears, he realizes that if he doesn't lose faith, even if he nearly reaches his breaking point, then he can do more than he ever imagined. Not a bad lesson to learn.

My experience on the show taught me that if we believe in Someone bigger than ourselves, we can do anything. When the inevitable storms of life blow our way we're forced to lean on God.

Ceremony might pass for real faith when the sun is shining. But when dark clouds send torrential rain into our lives, only real faith will enable us to endure.

It's at times like these that we must be willing to have our noses bloodied and our beliefs tested. We must come to grips with the idea that hardships, like storms, are often lurking somewhere on the horizon.

We must recognize that adversity is not God's punishment, nor is it evidence of His abandonment. In fact, often it is evidence of His love.

God knows that it's not about how we get through the storm but about whom we will be after the storm clears. Storms have a way of renewing and fortifying our belief in God. That's what makes them worth surviving.

So as I stood there that morning on Exile Island, looking over the Pacific Ocean and watching pale blue skies chase away the

storm clouds, I found myself with a renewed belief in God and a greater desire to serve Him.

Now, as I sit staring at my computer screen listening to the familiar creaks and groans of my old house, I think about that horrific storm in Panama. Then I think about all the hardships and challenges that have blown through my life since then. Once again I find myself thinking, What a blessing it is to believe in Someone bigger than myself.

Austin Carty is a speaker and freelance writer. He also works in the entertainment industry, modeling and acting. Based in North Carolina, he is currently working on his first nonfiction book. Visit him at .