

Stranded Cruise Passengers Turn to Faith

Carnival cruise ship *Triumph* might have fallen short of its name when a fire left the vessel lifeless in the Gulf of Mexico, but many passengers indeed triumphed over the foul conditions that ensued, thanks in part to an impromptu Bible study that brought them closer to each other and closer to God.

Joseph and Cecilia Alvarez were among the 400-plus passengers and crew who began the cruise on Feb. 7, with plans to return Monday, Feb. 11. But early that Sunday morning, Joseph smelled smoke from the couple's room on the first floor.

He heard people running down the hall and opened the door to see what was going on. That's when he spotted firefighters.

"My wife said, 'Let's go, let's go, let's go!'" he said. The pair quickly made their way up a few floors.

An engine room fire soon left the 893-foot ship stranded in the Gulf of Mexico, causing what would become nearly a four-day delay and leaving passengers with less than ideal accommodations. Cecilia could see nothing but water for miles and soon the questions began.

"What if I don't go home?" she thought. "What if I don't see my kids anymore?"

The couple has four children, ages 10 to 16, who were staying with a neighbor back home in San Antonio, Texas. They took the cruise to celebrate an early Valentine's Day.

Cecilia kept thinking about one Bible verse, Joshua 1:9: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be

with you wherever you go.”

Wouldn't it be great, she thought, if she and Joseph could get together with other Christians on the ship? If they could join other believers to lift each other up? It wasn't long after that they heard an announcement over the ship's intercom; passengers were invited to join a Bible study on deck.

It started out with about 25 people, Joseph said. They met on the upper deck running tracks.

“The Bible studies were great,” he said. “We did it for four days. ... It put our minds and our hearts at ease. We felt peace the whole time. We knew that there was a Mighty Power out there that would get us home and keep us safe so we could get home and see our children.”

When it started getting windy and cold, the group moved to a dining room inside, adding another 20 or so passengers who couldn't join them outdoors, some for mobility reasons.

Joseph himself called the steps on the ship “a killer.” He's had seven back surgeries and was running out of his pain medication. Some of the people in the Bible study prayed for him.

“Whenever two or more are gathered in His name, He's there,” Joseph said.

To pass the time, Joseph and his wife met other families, played games and swapped stories about their kids. The Bible study group, made up of all ages and different denominations, kept them going and looking on the bright side.

Participants shared testimonies, prayed and sang songs like “Amazing Grace,” “How Great is Our God” and a couple of songs in Spanish. They read Psalm 29:3–p“the voice of the Lord is over the waters”—and Psalm 91 about taking refuge in God.

“It uplifted them,” Joseph said. “You could see it. You could

feel it.”

Cecilia took advantage of the Bible in their cabin and thanked God for His protection. She remembers one teen saying they were there for a reason.

“I have God in my heart always,” Cecilia said, “but this situation ... I really appreciate and love God for what He has done for us.”

Their safe arrival home is just another example of God’s blessings, she said, and she has never been so happy to see land. She watched as the ship approached Mobile, Ala.

Back home, Cecilia sings in the church choir. Thursday, as the ship was pulled into port, she sang a different tune: “Sweet Home Alabama.” The couple arrived home early Saturday morning.

“I hugged the children and hugged my bed,” Joseph said. “I even missed the guinea pig my daughter has in her room.”

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