

Sailing on the Promises of God

Series: Fully Devoted Followers

Acts 27:1-44

Sunday, January 23, 2022

Why is it that the last leg of a long trip always seems to be the most difficult? When our kids were younger and we would make the 9-hour trip from our home in Iowa to our hometown in Ohio, without fail the last 50 or 60 miles always seemed to give us the most stress. It was as if our kids knew we were almost to the finish line, yet at that moment, they needed to let us know they had reached their limit.

We're in Acts 27 with just two chapters to go before Paul finally gets to Rome. This had been Paul's goal ever since, back in Acts 19, he resolved under the Holy Spirit's direction to visit Rome. It wasn't his final destination, but Rome would serve as a strategic stopover for Paul and his ministry team. We also know that it was the will of the Lord Jesus that Paul would go to Rome. Paul was given this assurance about his future,

“The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome”” (Acts 23:11, NIV).

Now, more than two years later, Paul was on the last leg of his journey. But it would not be smooth sailing. In Acts 27, Luke, the author of Acts has rejoined Paul. Luke gives a first-hand account of their odyssey through a violent storm and ultimately a shipwreck. In fact, historians have labeled Luke's eyewitness testimony as “one of the most instructive documents for the knowledge of ancient seamanship.”¹

We've read through our share of travel narratives during this sermon series. But this story isn't another one of Luke's travelogues. As Luke brings us on board, we're meant to feel the anxiety of sailing through a violent storm with the constant threat of danger. But even more, I think we as readers are meant to consider the question that must have been on the minds of everyone on board: Where was God in this storm?

While Paul wanted to go to Rome, remember that he was on board this ship bound for Italy as a prisoner under Roman escort. Fortunately, Paul didn't have to travel alone. Luke was along for the ride as well as their friend, Aristarchus. Paul's ministry team was even granted permission to visit friends during their stopover in Sidon.

The journey started on a positive note, but by verse 4 we get the first hint of trouble. The winds were against the ship as it ventured west. At first, this just meant that the ship's pilot had to adjust course. But then by verses 7 and 8, progress had slowed and travel had become difficult.

¹ *The Book of Acts* (NICNT), F. F. Bruce, p. 474.

Neither Luke nor Paul was a sailor, but they weren't strangers to sea travel. Writing to the Corinthians a few years earlier, Paul claimed to have been shipwrecked on three separate occasions and had

“spent a night and a day in the open sea” (2 Cor. 11:25, NIV).

So it was not out of line for Paul to warn the ship's crew about the potential dangers of continuing their voyage. Paul said to them,

“Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also” (v. 10).

Was this a prophetic vision? I don't think so. But Paul knew that winter travel on the Mediterranean was considered extremely dangerous, even for the most experienced of sailors. And yet, in verse 11, the pilot and owner of the ship gave the green light to sail on in order to find a safe harbor elsewhere for the winter.

When it looked safe enough to continue, the crew opted to hug the southern side of the island of Crete and inch along until they reached safety. But that's when things went from bad to worse. A hurricane-force wind called the Noreaster grabbed a hold of their ship and carried them out to sea. Try to imagine the chaos on board in the middle of this storm as the crew struggled to secure their lifeboat, brace the hull of the ship, and throw overboard anything they could stand to lose in order to lighten their vessel.

When we lived in Iowa, we had our share of severe weather. I remember the day when a tornado warning came over the radio that a storm was spotted south of us and that it was headed our direction. So I did what any rational person would do in this situation. I went outside to look. At first, all I saw was a clear blue Iowa sky. But within minutes, the sky turned a color green that I had never seen before and I knew we needed to grab the kids and head to the basement. Fortunately, that storm passed us by with no damage. But we were scared.

It's hard for me to compare this near-miss with those I know who have experienced storms of far greater magnitude, both literally and figuratively. I think of friends we made in Lake Charles, Louisiana whose lives were turned upside down by two hurricanes in 2020, followed by a record-breaking cold snap, and spring flooding, all while trying to navigate a worldwide pandemic. And every week I read the emails sent to our church prayer chain requesting prayer for those suffering from illness, grieving a death, navigating job loss, or coping with anxiety and depression.

Maybe it's not too hard to sympathize with Paul and his companions. We too may know what it's like to go from difficulty to danger to despair. Luke admitted in verse 20,

“When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved” (v. 20).

What might God teach us today from such a discouraging section of Scripture? If God wanted Paul to get to Rome, why did he permit such a dangerous journey?

In Acts 27, we see that, **in the storm, we’re faced with the reality that we live in a broken world and we cannot save ourselves.**

We live in a broken world. When Paul wrote to the church in Rome, he explained to them that,

“sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned” (Rom. 5:12, NIV).

Back in Genesis 3, in a world that God had made where everything was good, Adam rebelled against his creator, calling his own shots. He and his wife, Eve willfully disobeyed God. They sinned. As a result, God’s just judgment against their rebellion was that they, and ultimately all of us, would one day die.

One day our bodies will no longer function according to our Creator’s original good design and we will die. But we’re not just physical creatures. God created us with bodies and souls. And so, because of our sin, the judgment we deserve is hell, eternal separation from God.

But what does sin have to do with tornados and tsunamis, famine and forest fires, earthquakes, cancer, and pandemics? Why is the world so broken? In that same letter to the church in Rome Paul wrote these words,

“For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:20–21, NIV).

God subjected the creation to frustration. Because of sin, our world isn’t as it should be. Every time we experience either the threat or the reality of death, every time we find ourselves in the middle of a storm—whether literal or figurative—we should remember that our world is broken because of sin. Like those on the ship in the midst of that storm, we must recognize that from this brokenness we cannot save ourselves.

To be clear, we can’t always draw a straight line between a particular instance of brokenness and a particular act of sin. But the brokenness and death we experience in this world should remind us that things are not as they should be.

But God has not left this broken world without hope. Though all hope of being saved was abandoned in verse 20, verse 20 is not the end of the story. Let's continue reading from verse 21.

“²¹ After they 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. ²² But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. ²³ Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me ²⁴ 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.’ ²⁵ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. ²⁶ Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island”” (vv. 21-26).

In the storm, suffering may continue, but we must not think that God has abandoned his promises.

Let's take a closer look at what Paul said. At first, it might sound like he was saying, “I told you so!” But Paul's speech was really a call to faith. Paul was modeling what it's like to take God at his word. By sending an angelic messenger, God reaffirmed his promise that Paul must testify about the Lord in Rome and stand before Caesar. And with this promise, God assured Paul that everyone on board would survive.

Perhaps it would have been easier for those on board to trust in Paul's God if they too had heard and seen an angel declaring what God had promised. Maybe you've wanted the same from God in the middle of a storm. “God, send me an answer! Tell me what to do in this situation!” If so, you're in good company. King David prayed this way in Psalm 4,

“Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer” (Psa. 4:1, NIV).

How bold! Shouldn't David at least say, “*Please answer me*”? But God invites us to pray boldly and to call to him for answers. But when he answers, we need to trust him and need to be content with that answer. While we may be looking for God to give us a quick way of escape from the storm, the faith that God calls us to may mean that we're to stay with the ship. Look at the next part of the story at verse 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. ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors

from the stern and prayed for daylight.³⁰ 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.³¹ Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.”³² So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it drift away” (vv. 27–32).

Back in verse 12, they had hoped they could reach Phoenix on the island of Crete and wait out the winter. Instead, the storm caused them to be lost at sea for two weeks. Finally, in the middle of the night, the crew sensed that land was near. But now they faced another danger. As they measured the depth of the water, they were concerned that the ship might run aground on the rocks.

The situation was so desperate that those on board prayed for the morning to come and bring them out of the darkness. Maybe you can recall a time when you turned to God in prayer because the hope of a new day couldn’t come fast enough.

So close to land, some of the crew were ready to secretly board the lifeboat and fend for themselves. But that wasn’t God’s will for the ship. Look at verse 31,

“Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved”” (v. 31).

Paul’s confidence wasn’t in the sturdiness of the ship. Spoiler alert: the ship itself isn’t going to make it. To stay with the ship meant that those on board were to trust that God would not abandon his promises. The men on board were to take God at his word that not one life would be lost. Who knows what kind of faith was represented on board, but when the soldiers decided in verse 32 to cut the ropes securing the lifeboat, they were placing their lives into the care and keeping of Paul’s God.

God never abandons his promises. That doesn’t mean that God always grants us safety and security, health and happiness, peace and prosperity—at least not as long as we’re still citizens of this broken world. But we know that God has promised good to his people, to those who love him and who are called according to his purpose.

Going back to that passage in Romans 8 where Paul spoke of God subjecting the creation to frustration, we get a better picture of what it looks like to stay with the ship and trust that even in the storm God does not abandon his promises. Paul wrote,

“¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in

hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. ²⁶ In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:18-28, NIV).

In all things, including storms—both literal and figurative—God works for our good, that is, for the good purpose of conforming us to the image of his Son. God is good, and so often he does want us to enjoy his good blessings. He graciously may choose to give us good health, financial security, or safety in dangerous situations. But the greatest good that God promises us in Jesus Christ is that he will work in all things to make us more like his Son. God is good.

And that brings us to the end of this story. You can imagine that after fourteen days on a turbulent sea that appetites were spoiled by seasickness. But that's when Paul took the opportunity for another teachable moment. The crew needed to eat. But Paul knew that even in the simple act of eating, the goodness of God was on display. Let's finish the chapter, reading from verse 33.

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. ³⁴ 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." ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. ³⁷ Altogether there were 276 of us on board. ³⁸ When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea.

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. ⁴⁰ 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. ⁴¹ 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. ⁴² The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. ⁴³ 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. ⁴⁴ The rest were to get there on planks or on other pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land safely."

Everyone on board knew a shipwreck was inevitable. Yet, Paul encouraged his shipmates by pausing to break bread and to give thanks to God. In the middle of the Mediterranean sea, after weeks of being carried along by a storm, and with their arrival still uncertain, 276 sailors, soldiers, and prisoners took a moment to join Paul in giving thanks to God.

Be encouraged. **In the storm, there's still a place for celebrating God's goodness.** More than likely, every one of us in this room or watching this service online has either just come out of a storm, is still in the middle of one, or will find ourselves in a storm before too long. Giving thanks to God and celebrating his goodness may not dull the pain or prevent further loss. Turning to God in worship, especially when it's hard, may not send the storm away, but it will bring us and other encouragement as we seek to give God thanks. In the storm, there's still a place for celebrating God's goodness.

We've got one more chapter to go in our journey through the book of Acts. As we near the end, let pray and ask God to bring hope to our brokenness, to help us trust in his promises, and to see his goodness at work even in the storm.