

GOD'S GRACE IN THE STORM

Acts 27:1-44

Key Verse: 27:24

... 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."

In today's passage, Paul begins his journey to Rome as a prisoner on a cargo ship. The trip was not an easy one. There was a fierce storm and a shipwreck. But Paul remained calm and became a shepherd for the soldiers and the sailors. The life-threatening situation became an opportunity for him to show his faith in God. In his grace, God protected him and, because of Paul, all other lives were saved. We go through small and big storms in life. How can we remain calm and become a source of blessing to others in the midst of a storm? May God teach us the secret as we study this passage!

I. PAUL SAILS TO ROME AS A PRISONER (1-20)

Look at verse 1. *When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment.* After spending more than two years in prison, Paul was headed to Rome. A Roman centurion named Julius was in charge of transporting him and other prisoners. They boarded a ship that was headed to a small port in the western Asia (today's Turkey), stopping many ports along the coast (2). Paul was not alone in this trip. Who was with him? We can identify two persons. One was Luke, the author of Acts. The narrative in this chapter is in the first person. The pronoun "we" is used throughout the chapter. The other person was Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica (2). We remember him as the one who was persecuted in the riot in Ephesus (Ac 19:29). He was also a member of Paul's journey team to Jerusalem (Ac 20:4). Luke and Aristarchus decided to go with Paul their shepherd, as he was transported as a prisoner. They wanted to be with him and suffer with him. They were his true friends and coworkers. I am sure Paul was encouraged by their love and friendship. It is a tremendous blessing to have such friends and coworkers to be with us, especially when we go through tough times.

The next day the ship landed at Sidon, a port city of today's Lebanon. In kindness to Paul, Julius allowed him to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs (3). They encouraged Paul by providing a bag filled with toothpaste, socks and underwear. From Sidon, they put out to sea again. They passed to the lee of Cyprus because the winds were against them (4). After sailing across the open sea off the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, they landed at Myra in Lycia (5). There the centurion found a ship from Alexandria (Africa) sailing for Italy. It was a cargo ship carrying grains (38). It must have been a decent-size ship at that time because 276 people were on board along with the cargo (37). They made slow headway for many days because of the strong wind on the Mediterranean. With much difficulty, they arrived off Cnidus located southwestern tip of today's Turkey. From there, they wanted to sail due west toward Italy, passing the south of the Greek peninsula. But the wind would not allow them to go west. Instead,

they were driven toward south, ending up in a place called Fair Havens on the island of Crete (8).

The journey had not gone well. Much time had been lost. By now it was already after the Day of Atonement (that is, Yom Kippur, around mid-September to October). Winter was fast approaching when it was too dangerous to sail. At this point, Paul gave them a warning. Look at verse 10. *“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.”* Before you ask the question, “Why was Paul, a prisoner, trying to give advice to professional sailors?” you should know that he was a seasoned traveler on the Mediterranean Sea through his missionary journeys. He said in 2 Corinthians 11: 25, “... three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea.” Also as a servant of God, he had spiritual insight. The centurion, however, ignored him. He followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship instead of listening to Paul. They decided that Fair Havens was too small to winter in and wanted to sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and harbor there. The pilot was a navigation expert, but his judgment was clouded by his desire, and that of his men, to enjoy the nightlife of Phoenix. Living in an increasingly complex society, we tend to trust experts for everything, and ignore the voice of God’s servants. But it is wiser to listen to a spiritual man who stands on God’s word than to many experts with dubious motives and no spiritual insight.

Look at verse 13. *“When a gentle south wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete.”* It appeared that they made a right decision. A gentle south wind was exactly what they needed to go to Phoenix, a short distance away. The sailors were happy thinking about enjoying wild parties that night. They were expert seamen, but they could not see a monster storm approaching from beyond the island of Crete that would change everything. How easy it is for us to be deceived by a gentle wind!

Now look at verses 14-15. *“Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the Northeaster, swept down from the island. The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along.”* Many people believe that they are the captain of their boat and they can steer their life to any direction they want to. But that is not true. The sailors were driven by the storm. The “Northeaster” was probably a category 4 hurricane, with a wind gust of 131 to 155 mph, and storm surge of 13 to 18 feet. They could not sail from Fair Havens to Phoenix, which was only 34 miles away. Instead, their ship was driven southward toward Africa!

The high waves were crashing onto the vessel, flooding the deck along with the pounding rain, the howling wind sounded like ghosts, and the thunder was crackling like bombs exploding around them. As the storm gained intensity, they had to haul in their lifeboat and secure it. They passed ropes under the ship to keep it from breaking apart. Fear came into their hearts. They feared running aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, which was a great sandbank in the Mediterranean Sea, located on the northern coast of Africa. So they lowered the sea anchor (or the sails) and let the ship be driven along (17). The ship took such a violent battering that they began to throw the cargo

overboard. On the third day, they began to throw the ship's tackle overboard (19). They desperately tried to lighten the ship. Look at 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."* The pilot, the owner and the sailors reached their human limits. After doing everything they could, they despaired. They gave up all hope of being saved. This is the destiny of people who depend on themselves rather than on the Almighty God.

Many people today try to take charge of their lives instead of depending on God. They listen to other people who say to them, "Take charge of your life. You are the captain of your own ship." This sounds appealing. So they want to go to Phoenix rather than taking refuge in Fair Havens. Young people especially take this approach in life. Going to Thursday night parties sounds much more appealing than attending Thursday group Bible study meeting. Indeed, things may go smooth as they set out for Phoenix. A gentle south wind makes them feel elated. But it is calm before the storm. When storms of life overwhelm them, they don't know where to turn. They give up all hopes of being saved and let the waves determine the course of their lives. This needs not be the case. We can follow the spiritual advice based on the word of God and stay in Fair Havens. Jesus is our Fair Havens. He is our refuge. Only in Jesus, we can be safe. He is the captain of our ship. Only in Jesus we can have true hope.

II. PAUL'S FAITH AND COURAGE IN STORM (21-26)

Verse 21 says that they had gone a long time without food. It was not because they were pleading with God with fasting prayer. They lost appetites because of their despair from the violent storm. In this situation, 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. But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed"* (21-22). Paul didn't speak up because he wanted to say "I told you so." He cared about them. He rebuked them with a shepherd's heart. Then he gave them a promise. He said, "not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed." What? How could he say this to them in that situation? He could say it because of his faith in the Almighty God. He believed God's promise in his heart.

Look at verses 23-24. *Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me 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."* The angel of the Lord said, "Do not be afraid, Paul." This tells us that Paul was not a superman. Even he struggled with fear in the storm. No one is immune to fear in such circumstance. But the Lord helped Paul overcome the fear in his heart. We must know truth about fear. It does not come from God. Fear is planted by the devil. It is a weapon that Satan uses effectively to attack us. When we are paralyzed by fear, we become useless before God. The sailors and the soldiers were useless because they were overcome by fear. They had given up any hope of being saved. But Paul did not give in to fear. He went to God in prayer. He depended on God. And God sent his angel to help his servant Paul.

“Do not be afraid”—Jesus said these words to his disciples many times. Fear was one of the problems that his disciples had, as we do. One night they were caught in a fierce storm in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. From a mountain, Jesus saw them straining at the oars and decided to come to them, by walking on the water. When they saw him walking on the water, they were terrified, thinking he was a ghost. Jesus said to them, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid” (Mk 6:50). God does not want us to be afraid, even in a raging storm. The phrase, “Do not be afraid,” appears in the Bible 65 times. When fear comes to our mind, we must hear the voice of Jesus, as Paul did, who says to us, “Do not be afraid.” We can have peace in the midst of a storm, knowing that Jesus is with us.

The angel also reminded Paul of God’s plan for him to stand trial before Caesar. God had told him that he must testify in Rome (Ac 23:11). And God did not change his plan because of the storm. We should remember this, as we obey the purpose of God in our lives and share the gospel with young people of our time. We must not think that God changes his purpose for us, just because our circumstances change. Some people may say that campus mission is getting more difficult. Generation Y may be less open to God’s word than Generation X. Young people prefer spending time with sports, games, and other fun activities than the word of God. This may be true. However, our circumstances are not the driving force in our life of faith and mission. God is. His calling and his purpose are the driving force in our life. We must listen to God’s word. We did not choose God, but God chose us and appointed us so that we might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last (Jn 15:16). Even when our struggle seems to be futile, we must remember God’s purpose for us. God who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus (Php 1:6).

Then the angel said to Paul, “...and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.” The sailors had ignored Paul’s advice. They wanted to do what pleased them. They did not deserve God’s grace. But God graciously decided to save their lives for his servant’s sake. Because of Paul’s life of mission, the grace of God came to the undeserving men.

Look at verse 25. “*So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.*” Paul heard the word of God. But the reality was that he was still in the midst of storm. What did he do? He told the men that he had faith in God that it would happen just as God told him. He took God’s word as the word of God. This is what it means to have faith in God. It means to believe in his word in spite of the present reality. Paul was no longer fearful, because of his faith in God and his words.

III. PAUL ENCOURAGES THE SAILORS IN SHIPWRECK (27-44)

Paul’s words of encouragement brought hope to all on board. Then their situation began to change, after 14 days of being driven across the Adriatic Sea. The sailors sensed that they were approaching land. They took soundings and found that indeed they were getting close to land. Then the sailors had an evil plan. They pretended to lower some

anchors, but they actually lowered the lifeboat, in an attempt to escape, abandoning the ship. It was a selfish plan. Who was going to steer the ship without them? Men who try to save only their lives cannot be trusted in a crisis. Paul was alert to the problem. So he warned the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.” This time, the centurion listened to Paul. The soldiers cut the ropes and let the lifeboat fall into the sea and drift away. It was a bold decision.

What else did Paul do to help them? He told them to eat food. They had not eaten for over 14 days, because of the constant suspense. Now they needed strength to swim ashore. Paul had a shepherd’s heart to help them in every step. He encouraged them to eat, saying, “You need it to survive.” Then he said, “Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head.” This was an amazing promise. It was the expression of Paul’s faith in God. Paul promised that none of them would be hurt, let alone lose their lives. And he set an example for them. Look at verse 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.”* Paul’s act of giving thanks to God was another expression of his faith. Paul gave thanks to God in front of all the other travelers. He was thankful for God’s grace. He made it very clear to everyone that it was God who would deliver them from the storm. Verse 36 says, *“They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves.”*

Paul was a prisoner in chains. He was being transported to stand trial in Rome. But Paul remained calm through the storm. He had a shepherd’s heart for the people, 275 of them. He assessed the situation correctly and gave them good advice and encouraging words. How could he do this? What was his secret? His secret was that he was with God. He prayed and heard the voice of God. He had faith in God’s word. When we lack faith, we tend to panic when storms of life challenge us. We spend all our energy trying to steer our ship. We cry, we moan and even curse. We cannot remain calm, let alone be a blessing and encouragement to others. We learn here that, like Paul, we must depend on God in times of trials as well as prosperity so that we may be a source of blessing.

When daylight came, they saw a bay with a sandy beach. They cut loose the anchors and made a run for it. But the ship struck a sandbar and ran aground. It was broken to pieces, just as Paul had foretold. The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent their escape. But the centurion stopped them in order to spare Paul. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard and get to land. The rest used planks and pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land in safety. As Paul promised, they were all saved.

In this passage, we learn that God was with Paul in the midst of fierce storms as Paul was with God. Paul remained calm because of his faith in God. He became a source of blessing to the sailors and the soldiers. We learn that the storms of life are opportunities for us to grow in faith and be sources of blessing to others. May God help each one of us to listen to his word, put our faith in his promise, and experience his grace!