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WEATHERING LIFE'S STORMS

Acts 27:1-44

By

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Acts Lesson 69

Weathering Life's Storms Acts 27:1-44

One of the most unforgettable, worst days of my life took place in November, 1972. The 82-foot Coast Guard Cutter on which I did my reserve duty had to go out in 60-mile-per-hour gale-force winds to rescue a man and his daughter in their sailboat somewhere beyond Catalina Island. Forty-foot waves caused our boat to tilt so far over that I was sure we would capsize. The screws would come out of the water, revving the engines to full throttle. Then the whole boat would shudder and we would start back in the other direction. A desk, chairs, and file cabinets inside the cabin shifted from side to side with each roll. The only thing that kept me from being scared to death was the thought, "You never read about Coast Guard vessels going down in bad storms."

After nine hours of heaving my insides out, we saved the man and his daughter, who would have died. I use the term "we" loosely, as in the night that Chicago Bulls rookie forward Stacey King scored one point and Michael Jordan scored 69. King said, "I'll always remember this as the night that Michael Jordan and I combined to score 70 points" (*Reader's Digest* [10/91], p. 22). I'll always remember the day that my crew mates and I saved that man and his daughter. They saved him while I made a steady path between my bunk and the toilet!

If you've ever been in a terrible storm at sea in a smaller vessel, you can identify with Luke's description of the shipwreck in Acts 27. He and Aristarchus accompanied Paul ("we" resumes at 27:1, from 21:18) on this difficult journey to Rome. Scholars have wondered why Luke goes to such lengths to describe the details of this event, since at first glance it does not seem to fit into his purpose. Part of Luke's reason may be that the details reveal just how harrowing this experience was. Against the human helplessness of this frightening adventure stands the sovereign hand of God, who had promised Paul that he would testify in Rome (23:11). Since an angel repeats that promise to Paul here in the midst of the storm

(27:24), Luke's main purpose is to show that God's purpose cannot be thwarted, even by such powerful forces of nature.

Also, Luke shows Paul's calm, practical leadership in the midst of this crisis. Even though he was a prisoner, Paul is the dominant figure in the chapter. Because of him, all 276 people on board the ship were saved from death. Paul's testimony, both by his calm demeanor and by his words, would have had an unforgettable impact on the people on board.

Even if you've never been in a storm at sea, you have been and will be in many storms in life. In some of them, you may despair of life itself, even as everyone on board here did (27:20). Paul's experience teaches us that ...

If we will trust in God's sovereign care for us in life's storms,
He will use us to bear witness to many.

There are three main lessons here:

1. God is sovereign over the storms of life.

The biblical doctrine of God's sovereignty over all things is one of the most practical truths for us to apply in times of trial. There are those who teach that it is not God's will when some tragedy hits. I have heard a pastor in our town declare at a funeral that the person's death was not God's plan! I think that by saying that, he was trying to make God look good and to comfort the grieving family members. But he did neither! If it wasn't in God's plan, then God is at the mercy of some greater power that got the upper hand, which is a blasphemous thing to say about God! And, it hardly gives comfort to the grieving to think that somehow God was momentarily overpowered just when our loved one needed protection! It is far more comforting to believe what the Bible teaches, that God is absolutely sovereign over everything that takes place, even over the most tragic events in history (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28). There are three practical truths that stem from this:

A. When things are out of our control, they are never out of God's control, no matter how humanly impossible the situation.

This ship was out of control (27:15-20), at the mercy of this fearsome storm. The power of the wind and waves in such a storm

is awesome! Even in a modern Coast Guard vessel, you realize very quickly that your control over the situation is minimal. But in Paul's day, they were completely out of control and helpless. They did everything they could to keep the ship from breaking apart (27:17), but beyond that, there was nothing else to do. Since they had no compass or other instruments, and they couldn't see the sun or stars, they were lost in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. They were fearful that they might drift 350 miles to the south, where there are dangerous sandy reefs off the coast of Libya (Syrtis, 27:17). They jettisoned a lot of the cargo and even the non-essential ship's tackle. But after doing all that they could do, they were not in control.

But God was in control! He always is! This storm did not take Him by surprise. He was not in heaven in a panic, summoning His angels to come up with a rescue plan for Paul. God caused the boat to drift 476 miles from the small island of Clauda to Malta, another speck in that vast sea. Although the sailors were not in control, God was!

In the 19th century, an experienced Scottish yachtsman, James Smith, made a careful on-site study of this narrative. He asked experienced Mediterranean navigators what the mean drift of a ship of this kind would be in such a gale. He learned that it would drift about 36 miles in 24 hours. Even today, the soundings mentioned in verse 28 indicate that the ship was passing Koura, a point on the east coast of Malta, on her way into St. Paul's Bay. Smith calculated that a ship leaving late in the evening from Clauda would, by midnight of the 14th day, be less than three miles from the entrance to St. Paul's Bay. He also reported that no ship can enter St. Paul's Bay without passing within a quarter of a mile from the point of Koura, where the sailors would have heard the breakers, thus surmising that they were nearing land, as Luke reports in verse 27 (cited by F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* [Eerdmans], pp. 514-515).

This shows the perfect accuracy of Luke's narrative and that we can trust in God's Word. When things in our lives are out of our control, they are never out of God's control. Trust in the promises of His Word of truth!

- B. We aren't necessarily out of God's will when we get caught in a storm.

Sometimes when we find ourselves in the midst of a sudden storm in life, we wonder if we're out of God's will. We may be, especially if we got into the storm because of sin in our lives. But we may be exactly where God wants us to be. The Lord had told Paul that he would testify for Him in Rome (23:11), but He had not bothered to mention the little detail of this storm and shipwreck!

Matthew 14:22 reports that immediately after feeding the 5,000, Jesus "made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away." The word "made," which means "to compel by force or persuasion," shows that the disciples didn't have much to say about what they were doing. The following verses show that Jesus was deliberately sending them into a storm at sea! He knew that that storm was coming, but He wanted to teach them His power over storms by walking to them on the water. So even though they were in a fierce storm, they were precisely in the will of God for them at that moment.

Just about every time that I have made a major move, I have experienced unusual trials. When Marla and I went to Dallas so that I could finish seminary, we got caught in a major snowstorm in southern New Mexico on the way. We got to Dallas, finally found an apartment, and three days later got mugged at gunpoint. The gun sight on the robber's pistol tore my hand open. I wondered if I had somehow missed God's direction.

When we moved to Flagstaff, we had major problems with our house in California. When it finally sold, we had trouble finding an affordable house here. Just as we moved in, a major controversy erupted between the former elders and me, threatening my continuing in the ministry here. But in each storm, I'm convinced that we were in God's will for us at that time. The point is, God's will for His children sometimes includes storms.

C. We aren't ever out of God's care when we get caught in a storm.

Even though the sailors did not know where they were and had no control over the situation, God knew exactly where they were. They never went off of His radar screen. And He cared for all of them, even for those that did not know that He exists, as seen by the fact that He spared all of their lives. Of course He especially

cared for His children on board, Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus. If my kids are all on board a ship or a plane, I care about everyone on board, but I especially care about those three children of mine. If you are God's child through faith in Christ, you can be assured that He cares for you in every storm that He takes you through. Peter combines God's sovereignty and His care when he tells us to humble ourselves under God's mighty hand, and then adds, "casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you" (1 Pet. 5:6-7).

So God's sovereignty over everything that happens is a source of great comfort for the believer in the storms of life. But God's sovereignty never negates our responsibility. To conclude that since God is sovereign, whatever will be will be, and thus to kick back and do nothing, is not biblical.

2. Our responsibility in the storms of life is to trust openly in God's care for us.

Our text reveals four aspects of trusting openly in God's care:

- A. To trust openly in God's care is not opposed to using prudence and common sense.

Paul was a man of great faith, and he specifically testifies that he believes God in this trial (27:25). So we can assume that he was trusting God in verse 10 when he advised the men in charge not to continue with the trip due to the lateness in the year. The "fast" (27:9) refers to the Day of Atonement, which was in early October that year. Any time after September 14th was risky for sailing in the Mediterranean, and no one sailed after November 11th until the end of winter, because of the frequent storms (Bruce, p. 506). So we need not assume that Paul had had a revelation from God warning him about the storm. Rather, he was just using common sense. After all, he had already been in three shipwrecks, including a night and a day spent drifting in the deep (2 Cor. 11:25)!

But the pilot and ship owner did not like the harbor of Fair Haven for the winter, and along with the centurion decided to try to make the 40 miles to Phoenix. The moderate wind that came up fooled them into supposing that they had gained their purpose, and so they launched off into what would shortly become a major disaster. So much for expert opinion! As Spurgeon observed, that was

not the only voyage that commenced favorably and ended disastrously (*Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopedia* [Baker], 11:436).

But the point is, there was nothing wrong with Paul's using good judgment and common sense. Sometimes people imply that trusting in the Lord necessarily means casting reason to the wind and doing something absurd. Sometimes the Lord does expect us to do something by faith that those in the world consider foolish because they do not trust in God. But we had better be sure that the Lord is behind such things, or we end up looking awfully stupid in the world's eyes! Trusting God and using your brain are not necessarily opposed to one another.

- B. To trust openly in God's care means that we will be different in the storm than those who do not know God.

Paul stands out above all others in this desperate situation because of his calm faith in God. It seems that for a while, even Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus lost hope and were fearful, because Luke states, "from then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned" (27:20). The angel's word to Paul, "Do not be afraid" (27:24), implies that he was afraid. After all, he was only human, and when we are overwhelmed by a catastrophe of this magnitude, even the strongest believers can momentarily falter.

But the angel reminded him of God's earlier promise that he would bear witness in Rome, and he also promised Paul that all on board would be saved. So Paul stood up and reminded them of his earlier warning, not just to say, "I told you so," but to establish his credibility. Then he gave them all a word of encouragement concerning God's promise. Later, Paul encouraged them all to eat some food so that they would have the strength to get to shore (27:34). He openly thanked God for the food before he ate, unashamedly showing these rough sailors, soldiers, and fellow prisoners his open trust in God.

If we want to stand out in a time of trial from those who do not know the Lord, we've got to have a daily walk of seeking God *before* the trial hits. In Proverbs 1:24-29, wisdom personified warns us that if we refuse to seek her during normal times, she will laugh at us when our dread comes like a storm and when distress and anguish come upon us. But if we daily seek God and His wisdom

during normal times, when a storm hits, we will be different than those in the world, because we know and trust our God.

- C. To trust openly in God's care is not opposed to using the means that God gives to get us out of the storm.

The angel promised Paul that everyone on board would be saved (27:24). But during the final night, the sailors were trying to escape from the ship in the dinghy, under the pretense of laying out anchors from the bow (27:30). Paul saw what was happening and realized that those on board needed the sailors' expertise to get to land in the morning. So he said to the centurion, "Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved" (27:31). By now the centurion had come to respect Paul's wisdom, and so he ordered his soldiers to cut the lines to the ship's boat, so the sailors could not escape by themselves. Also, Paul realized that for everyone to be saved, they needed strength. But no one had eaten anything for two weeks, due to seasickness and perhaps due to the difficulty of preparing food. So he took bread, gave thanks to God, and ate, encouraging all of them to eat also, telling them that the food was for their preservation (27:34-36).

In other words, although God promised that everyone would be preserved alive, Paul did not assume that it would happen apart from the use of proper means. The sailors could not escape, and everyone needed the strength that came from eating. In the same way, God has promised that some from every tribe and tongue and people and nation will be in heaven because Jesus purchased them with His blood (Rev. 5:9). But they won't be there unless we labor through our prayers, our giving, and our sending some to go and tell them the gospel. God is sovereign to save His elect, but He does it through the means that He has appointed.

- D. To trust openly in God's care means that we will bear verbal witness as God gives opportunity.

When God encouraged Paul through the angel's promise, Paul didn't keep it to himself. Neither did he make everyone think that he was just a positive person, and that they all should keep a positive outlook as well. He used the situation to tell them about God, about his trust in God, and to promise that God would spare all of their lives through this ordeal. When he encouraged them all to eat

some bread, Paul could have thought, "These are pagan men. Why ask God's blessing on the food in front of such rough men?" But rather, he openly gave thanks to God in the presence of all (27:35).

In times of trial, people are especially open to spiritual things. When life is out of control, and nothing seems to be working, people are open to hear about a God who is in control. We should not hesitate to be bold to tell them about the true and living God and the eternal life that He offers them through His Son, Jesus Christ.

3. God will use our trusting Him in the storm to bear witness to many.

As long as men can devise human ways of coping with the storm apart from God, they will do so. These sailors had heard Paul's testimony that God would deliver them all, but they were going to use their own ingenuity to save themselves. But God only has one way of salvation, which is the Lord Jesus Christ. He won't let people save themselves in their own ways, or add anything to the way that He has provided. Because Paul trusted God and bore witness to God's promise of deliverance, the other 275 passengers on that ship heard about God. No doubt in the days and winter months to follow on Malta, Paul was able to give them the gospel more fully and clearly than he could do on board during the storm. One man who trusts God in a storm of life can have a major impact on others who see the reality of God in his life.

Conclusion

In late 1735, a ship made it's way to the New World from England. On board was a young Anglican minister, John Wesley, who had been invited to serve as a pastor to British colonists in Savannah, Georgia. A storm hit and the ship found itself in serious trouble. Wesley, who was chaplain of the vessel, feared for his life.

But he noticed that the group of German Moravians, who were on their way to preach to American Indians, were not afraid at all. In fact, throughout the storm, they sang calmly. When the trip ended, he asked the Moravian leader about his serenity, and the Moravian responded with a question: Did he, Wesley, have faith in Christ? Wesley said he did, but later reflected, "I fear they were vain words."

Wesley's experience in Georgia was a failure, both personally and ministry-wise. A bitter Wesley returned to England. After speaking with another Moravian, Peter Boehler, Wesley concluded that he lacked saving faith. On May 24, 1738, he had an experience that changed everything. He described the event in his journal:

In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. (From the web site, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/holidays/fourthofjuly/features/wesley.html>).

God used those Moravians' trusting Him during that storm at sea to bring about the conversion of the great evangelist, John Wesley. If you're going through a storm, He wants you to trust Him. He is sovereign over your storm. If you trust Him openly, He will use you to bear witness to many who need to know the Savior, who alone can deliver us from the storm of God's wrath that is sure to come on the whole earth.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the doctrine of God's sovereignty very practical in life's storms? Why is a denial of it a serious error?
2. If we can't determine God's will by the absence of trials, how can we know that we are in His will?
3. Exactly how should Christians be different than the world in the midst of trials? Is it wrong to cry or express grief?
4. Someone asks, "If God is totally sovereign, why pray or evangelize?" Your response?

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