

The Storm God Didn't Calm

Acts 27

We'll read Acts 27, Paul's ship journey from Jerusalem to Rome. A few chapters earlier, Paul was arrested in Jerusalem. Jews were trying to kill Paul, and there was a riot. A Roman centurion was there to keep the peace. He rescued Paul from the angry Jews and also arrested Paul for being a trouble maker. Put chains on his hands and his feet. That was Acts 21.

From Acts 22 to 26, Paul the prisoner has several trials, but none of the judges knows what to do with him. It is hard to put a finger on anything he has done wrong. Most of his judges are corrupt. Eventually, in Acts 26, Paul appeals to Caesar, their supreme court. He wants to stand trial before Caesar in Rome. It is not that this trial will be fair, but if they take Paul to Caesar, then he can speak about Christ in Rome, and that he wants.

Luke the writer of Acts was travelling with Paul. Acts 27 begins, "when it was decided that *we* would sail for Italy." Luke was also on that ship as a passenger. The ship had 276 people on board, so it was a fair-sized ship. There were sailors, passengers like Luke, prisoners like Paul, soldiers to guard the prisoners, and cargo. Luke knows the details because he was there.

This journey had bad weather from the start, and most of the story is about a horrendous storm than went on and on and on. Nothing suggests that the storm was God's judgment or God's opposition to anything. God was sovereign over that storm, but on the Mediterranean Sea it was the time for storms, and this storm just did its thing. But God was paying attention.

Poor Sailing From Adramyttium to Crete – 27:1–8

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. We boarded a ship from Adramyttium about to sail for ports along the coast of the province of Asia, and we put out to sea. Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was with us.

The next day we landed at Sidon; and Julius, in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs. From there we put out to sea again and passed to the lee of Cyprus because the winds were against us. When we had sailed across the open sea off the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy and put us on board. We made slow headway for many days and had difficulty arriving off Cnidus. When the wind did not allow us to hold our course, we sailed to the lee of Crete, opposite Salmone. We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea.

“The winds were against us,” “we made slow headway for many days,” “we had difficulty arriving,” “the wind did not allow us to hold our course,” “we moved along the coast with difficulty.” Not going well. Nothing in Acts 27 suggests that this is from God or from the enemy. It’s just bad weather.

Paul’s Advice and the Centurion’s Plan – 27:9–11

Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Day of Atonement. So Paul warned 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.” But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. Since the harbor was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and winter there. This was a harbor in Crete, facing both southwest and northwest.

It was the season for bad storms on the Mediterranean Sea. They all knew that. Paul said, “Don’t try to go any farther. Don’t move. Or you will lose ship, and cargo, and lives.” The centurion is in charge, apparently. The pilot and the owner want to go just a little farther up the quiet side of Crete, not the windy side, into a better harbour, and spend the winter there.

Caught in the Storm – 27:13–20

When a gentle south wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete. 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. As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure, so the men hoisted it aboard. Then they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Because they were afraid they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis [the African coast to the south], they lowered the sea anchor [to slow down the ship] and let the ship be driven along. We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. On the third day, they threw the ship’s tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.

They stayed close to the shore. They were careful. It was not enough. A hurricane wind comes right over the island of Crete and blows them out into the open sea. Next day they throw cargo overboard, and third day they throw in sailing gear with their own hands. Not sure what exactly they threw in, but “with their own hands” means it was desperate. Anything to make the ship lighter and float longer. No sun or stars for many days. Unbelievable. This storm does not let up at all. It sounds dreadful.

“We finally gave up all hope of being saved.” This includes Luke and Paul. It took quite a few days for them to give up all hope, but eventually they did. God let it get that bad, even for his people with strong faith. *We finally gave up all hope of being saved.*

Paul’s Encouraging Message – 27:21–26

This is the most important paragraph of the story, so we will spend more time on these verses. *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. But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. Last night an angel of the God whose I am 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.’ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island.”*

“After they had gone a long time without food.” This tells us how bad the storm was. They were too sick, too tense, too busy hanging on, too scared.

“You should have taken my advice; you would have spared yourselves.” Paul does not spend much time on this, but he says it, because they need to know that he’s a reliable voice. The rest of Paul’s message is hopeful and encouraging.

“Keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed.” The last paragraph ended, *“we finally gave up all hope of being saved.”* Now, he says that not one person will be lost! What an encouraging word from a reliable voice.

“The God whose I am and whom I serve.” I love this description of God, because we can all use this. Which God sent the angel? The God whose I am and whom I serve. This leaves open which God Paul actually meant. On this occasion, that was enough. Try this on yourselves. Describe God this way: the God whose I am and whom I serve.

“The angel stood beside me and said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul.’” Folks, Paul had given up hope, just like the rest. He feared this storm would take his life. Another time, in Acts 18, the Lord appeared to Paul and said, “don’t be afraid.” There Paul was afraid of getting beat up again. At the end of Ephesians 6, Paul asks for prayer. “Pray that I will preach fearlessly.” Then he asks again, “pray that I will preach fearlessly, as I should.” The angel said, “don’t be afraid, Paul.” Paul knew about being afraid.

“You must stand trial before Caesar.” “You are going to live, Paul,” said the angel, “because there is at least one more thing God wants you to do.” People, God has a list of things he wants each of us to do, and no believer dies until God has checked off everything on his list.

Sometimes people have their own list of what they want to do before they die. God may or may not care about our list. But God has his list. “Don’t be afraid, Paul, you have to stand trial before Caesar.” No believer dies until God says their job is done.

The angel continued: “*God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.*” This is the best line in the whole story. When Paul first warned them, in verse 10, he said there would be loss of life. Now, not only will Paul live to stand trial, but God also graciously gives Paul all the other lives on that boat, 275 other people. Why will all those people survive? What’s the real story? God graciously gave their lives to Paul.

Let’s ask this another way. Who is taking who to Rome? At the start, the Emperor’s soldiers hire a ship to take Paul and other prisoners to Rome. The centurion and his soldiers are taking prisoners to Rome. But by verse 24, God has put all those lives in Paul’s hands. Paul is taking the centurion and the soldiers with him, and everyone else on that ship as well. They will all live, because God gave them to Paul.

So Paul ends: “*So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island.*” Paul himself was much encouraged by what the angel told him, and he encouraged everyone on that ship. Keep up your courage, people. *In the world you will have trouble, but take heart. I have overcome the world.*

False Salvation – 27:27–32

On the fourteenth night we were still being driven across the Adriatic Sea, when about midnight the sailors sensed they were approaching land. 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. Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight. 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. Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.” So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it drift away.

God gave Paul the lives of all who sailed with him. That was the only way those people would survive. These sailors want to set off on their own, thinking they would be safer in a little boat. For all to be saved, it was important that everyone stayed together. The soldiers listened to Paul and made sure no one left in the lifeboat.

Food to Survive – 27:33–38

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

Here again you can see that by the end of the fourteen days, Paul is the leader on that ship. Fourteen days, constant suspense, no food. Adrenaline must be a remarkable thing.

“I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive.” God gave all their lives to Paul, but people still need to use their heads and do what is reasonable to do to make God’s plan work. *“You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head.”*

“He took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves.” It sounds like these people are all dazed from exhaustion and 14 awful days. They needed to see Paul eat in front of them for them to get going themselves. Paul knew they needed to eat in order to survive. So he ate and they ate.

Running Aground on the Island (Malta) – 27:39–41

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. 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. 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.

This is probably why the sailors needed to stay with the ship. They needed to make sure that the ship made the best approach to the island as could be made. That was a part of how God saved everyone.

The Final Threat, Everyone Safe on Land – 27:42–44

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

There has been quite a bit of cooperation on this trip. Julius the centurion has been good to Paul from the start. Everyone needs to eat to survive, and with some encouragement they do. The soldiers need to make sure the sailors stay on board, and they do. Then the soldiers want to kill the prisoners, and you cannot blame them. If prisoners escaped, the guards were executed. Always. But Julius would not let them execute the prisoners.

“In this way everyone reached land safely.” Such a wonderful line. Earlier, they had finally given up all hope of being saved. And now everyone reached land safely.

Some Reflections

Why did Paul not pray for God to calm the storm, the way Jesus calmed the sea in Luke 8? We don't know. The believers probably did pray, but it was not a factor. The believers themselves finally gave up all hope of being saved.

Everyone on board was horrible vulnerable, life hanging by a thread for fourteen days, and at the same time, everyone on board is completely protected and secure. They don't know it until the angel speaks to Paul, and it sure does not look like they are protected and secure. But they are.

This is one of the ways God takes care of us. God lets the storm rage, he does nothing to calm the storm. He does not shorten it. He does not take us out of the storm. We go right through it. It is frightening and exhausting. But if God decides we're going to come through it and keep serving him, then we will.

Paul was doing everything right. God liked what Paul was doing. There was nothing Paul could have done to prevent this, or to escape this. He did not make a mistake. It just happened.

What's your storm? Are you in a storm that's gone on too long? Jesus won't calm the sea? He won't say "Peace, be still"? Acts 27 shows us that. Either way, there is a God whose we are and whom we serve. He says, "Don't be afraid." Because of that God, things will end well. Amen.

PRAYER: Father, strengthen our faith when the storm is long. We doubt that you are present at all. Strengthen our faith. May we not lose our confidence. Come to us and say, "don't be afraid." Thank you for all the times you say, "don't be afraid." Thank you for rescuing everyone on that ship. Thank you for showing us what you do in storms. You are the God whose we are and whom we serve. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.