

## **All Were Brought Safely to Land**

There are likely few of us here today who have not, at one time or another, been caught in a storm. We all know what it's like to witness massive thunder and lightning storms. Some perhaps have even witnessed tornadoes firsthand. Regardless of how one defines it, we all identify with the power and image of storms. Yet having said that, my guess is that few if any of us have witnessed firsthand a massive storm at sea, let alone been caught on a ship in the middle of it.

The closest I've come to that took place several years ago. I was teaching a class on a cruise ship and on the second day of the cruise, we encountered some moderately rough seas. It was hard to teach, let alone concentrate as things rocked back and forth the entire day. Several of the students in the class became seasick and had to leave. Remember, that was on a large and modern cruise ship. What would it have been like if we had been on a much smaller vessel, like something that would have been common in New Testament days?

Well, as we near the end of our study of the book of Acts -- two weeks to go after today's message -- we will read about a massive storm at sea, a storm the Apostle Paul experienced while he was on his way to Rome. And although the specifics of the storm are exciting to consider, what I find even more important are the points of application we can extract and apply as we experience the various storms of life that engulf us from time to time. So with that in mind, what I intend to do this morning is walk us through chapter 27 of Acts. You can turn there now. As we walk through the chapter, we will note several aspects of the storm; but more importantly, we will dig out important principles to apply when facing our storms.

Now before we read parts of the chapter, let me set the stage for you. I can do this very quickly. As we discussed last week, the Apostle Paul at this point in time had been under house arrest for the previous two years. This was the result of a riot that took place in Jerusalem after Paul preached in the temple. As a result, he was placed under protective custody and remained under arrest for two years in Caesarea. During that time, he had an opportunity to preach and to share his personal salvation story in front of the Jewish leaders: Felix the governor, his successor Festus, and King Herod.

Now recall that from the initial days of his arrest, every Roman authority he interacted with came to the same conclusion. No matter what accusations the Jews brought against him, there was nothing under Roman law that warranted his imprisonment, let alone his execution. However, their situation was complicated by the fact that Paul had appealed his case to Rome. As a Roman citizen, it was his right to do so. It's no different than how our legal system works; appealing to a higher court when needed.

Take a look at the last verse of chapter 26. It says, "And Agrippa said to Festus, 'This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.'" What the king was saying is that since Paul had appealed his case to the Supreme Court, i.e. Rome, they had no option but to send him there.

Now as we enter chapter 27, we come to the specifics of his journey to Rome and the description of the storm he and 275 others encountered along the way. I am not going to read the entire chapter this morning, but I do want you to keep your Bibles open to Acts 27, as there are several passages we will look at.

The first thing I want you to note is in verse one. Catch what it says: “And when it was decided that **we** should set sail for Italy.” That phrase tells us that the author of the book of Acts, the Apostle Luke, was a firsthand witness to the events he described. If there is anything we know about Luke, both from the book of Acts as well as from the gospel he wrote, he is exacting and precise in how he writes. That is to say that his description of the storm should be taken quite literally, as Luke is known for accuracy.

Now the initial part of the chapter gives us a sense of the route they took on their way to Rome. Realize there were no travel agents available to book a trip on their behalf. The centurion in charge of delivering Paul to Rome had to find transportation as best as he could. The first part of the chapter describes their route. From Caesarea they sailed along the coast of Asia. They sailed past Sidon, Cyprus and the coast of Cilicia. They passed Myra, Cnidus, Crete and Lasea, where they landed in a city called Fair Haven. In verse 9, we see that they were delayed in Fair Haven for a considerable time, apparently waiting for favorable sailing conditions.

They could have spent the winter in Fair Haven, but for some reason this was not acceptable to them. Understand, by this time of year sailing was very risky. Travel along the coast was dangerous from mid-September to mid-November. In addition, all sailing in the open sea was halted from mid-November until early February.

Now at this point, we see Paul’s initial involvement in the process. In verse 10 he said, “Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and ship, but also of our lives.” But note what happened in verse 11: “The centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said.” After all, why should they listen to him? He was a prisoner with no sailing experience whatsoever. So as a result, they decided to put out to sea, hoping they could reach Phoenix on Crete where they intended to spend the winter.

Follow along with me as I read verses 13-32. Here we see the core of the storm narrative. At the outset, there are several things worth noting as we examine the details of the story. Each of these represents truths for us to understand and embrace. The first principle for us to consider is that no one is immune from the storms of life; and yes, that includes God’s choice, obedient and faithful servants. Let me say it again. No one is exempt from the storms of life. No matter how faithfully one is serving the Lord, no matter how closely one is walking with God, no matter how many previous storms one has weathered, God may choose to send yet more storms.

Consider this; who was a more faithful servant of the Lord, and who knew storms better than the Apostle Paul? In II Corinthians 11:25 he wrote, “Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on

frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from the Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.” I read that and I thought, now wait a minute. Should we not expect that God would protect someone like Paul from such things? Friends, that’s not the case; and in fact, God’s servants often undergo storms more than others, and that for the purpose of bringing glory to God and expanding their ministry impact.

I don’t have time this morning to list for you the multitude of people over the course of church history that experienced all manner of storms. Paul knew storms, even though he was faithful, obedient, humble, close to God, and used mightily by God while consistently ministering to others. None of that prevented this particular storm. Contrary to what some popular teachers peddle today, closeness to God is no guarantee against storms. They will come; and when they do, we must never interpret it as God’s disfavor. Rather, as Paul did, we must see it as part of what God wishes to accomplish through us as we weather the storm and all it encompasses.

If the scriptures teach us anything, it’s that God will not send a storm our way unless he intends to see us through it as well. Paul knew that and he acted accordingly. Job understood that as well when he wrote, “Shall we accept good from God and not receive bad?” We must learn to do the same.

Now moving on, there is something worth noting in verse 13 that’s instructive as well. Take a look at the initial part of the verse: “Now when the south wind blew gently.” No doubt everyone has heard the phrase “the calm before the storm.” That’s literally the case for Paul and his travelling companions. In spite of Paul’s warning to wait in Fair Haven, the ship’s captain assumed that they were safe when the south wind blew gently, so they weighed anchor and set sail.

Look at verses 14 and 15: “But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster struck down from the land. And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along.” Pay attention to the word *tempestuous*. In the original language, it’s the word which we translate as *typhoon* in English. So clearly this is no small wind, no small storm. As a result of the storm’s fury, the sailors had no choice but to give way to it. They realized that fighting against the wind would prove futile.

Now it’s interesting to note that the storm came upon them suddenly, thereby interrupting what they perceived as calm and safe seas. There is a lesson in that for us, I believe. I am certain that many of us here can identify with the sudden and unexpected interruption of what we perceived to be a calm and safe season of life. Jobs are lost, illness strikes, tragedy invades, the unexpected and unwanted is thrust upon us, and the safety and security we enjoyed is suddenly and without warning torn from us. The simple reality is that no one here today knows with certainty what the next phone call might bring, no matter how calm our seas appear at the moment.

Friends, this leads to an observation that's crucial for us to embrace; something that's all over this chapter of scripture. God is supremely sovereign over the storms of life. Who but God can initiate a typhoon? He controls every aspect of it. He controls the softly blowing south wind, the calm times we long for, as well as the tempestuous winds that come upon us suddenly.

But there is more to it than that. Not only does God determine the onset of the storm, he determines its severity, he decrees how long it lasts, he dictates who experiences it along with us, as well as how it will end. Let me show you some specifics in the text to amplify on those points. As it relates to the severity of the storm, take a look at verses 18 and 20 where it says, "We were violently storm tossed; when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days..." Who but God is sovereign over the ferocity and characteristics of such a storm?

Note as well verse 27: "When the fourteenth night had come." Who but God determines the length of the storm? For some types of storms, 14 days might seem short. For the person who just lost a job, finding another one in 14 days appears brief, does it not? But for Paul and his companions, 14 days in a typhoon on a small wooden ship must have seemed like an eternity.

But there is more. Note what it says in verse 37. There were 276 people on board. From that we can see that God was sovereign over who experienced the storm along with Paul. At times, our storms affect only a few people. At other times, more than a few. God determines that. In addition, don't lose sight of the fact that Paul had to pass through the storm until God intervened to remove him from it. There was no coast guard helicopter to sweep in and rescue him. He could not send out a may-day distress call. There was no SOS signal for him to initiate. He had to go through the entire thing, with relief coming only when and how God determined.

Note especially how their storm experience ended. I find this particularly interesting. Note carefully, the storm did not stop. Rather, the shipwreck removed them from it. What that tells me is that those on board had to lose their only source of security, the ship, as a means of escaping the storm. There is a very important principle for us to consider in that observation. Friends, from your perspective, God may appear to be shipwrecking your life; but in his way of doing things, your shipwreck may constitute his means of deliverance. Let me say that again. Your shipwreck may be God's means of deliverance.

Would they have chosen a shipwreck in order to be free from the storm? Doubtful. There's a huge lesson in that. God often sends our storms in ways we would never have considered. We may have to lose every semblance of safety, everything we've come to depend on -- for them it was the ship -- before we are delivered from our storms. That can be very hard for us accept, let alone experience. My guess is that many of us here today can identify with what it's like to be delivered from a storm in a manner we would not have chosen; the process may have involved the loss of everything we were clinging to at the time. They lost their ship as God's means of deliverance from the storm.

Now there is another principle in the text from which we can learn. Follow along with me. Look again at verses 16 through 19: "We managed with great difficulty to secure the ship's boat. After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then fearing that they

would run aground on the Syritis, they lowered the gear, and thus they were driven along. Since we were violently storm tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. And on the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands." Do you catch what took place? They did everything they could to help themselves in the midst of the storm. It appears that every action they took was based on their knowledge of sailing. They did what they could in order to save themselves.

That speaks to each of us, I believe. You see, although they had no control over the storm, they did what they could to weather the storm. Their default position was not one of "woe is me, poor me." Yes, that came later; but initially, they acted as best they could to secure their safety. What that tells me is that God does not expect us to sit idly by when storms rage. He gave us a brain to do what we can, yet always under the umbrella of his sovereignty.

One of the most frequent topics I discuss with people is how they might handle the various storms they find themselves in. At times changes are possible, changes that might release them from their storm. God is in the process regardless of whether there are things we can do to escape or not. In their case, there was nothing they could do to escape the storm, although they tried everything their knowledge of sailing dictated. Their release came in the form of a shipwreck.

Note the timing of when Paul spoke up to provide the leadership they needed. Take a look at the end of verse 20: "All hope of our being saved was at last abandoned." It was at that point that Paul stood up among them and spoke. Paul waited until he perceived they had given up hope before he intervened, and the manner in which he intervened is interesting. He spoke to their physical need for food, as well as to their need for hope. Verse 21 tells us that they had been without food. Glance down as well to verse 33: "Paul urged them all to take some food."

However, the most important thing he did was to relate to them the message he received from the Lord about their ultimate safety. Verse 23 says, "An angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul, you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.' So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told." Do you see what happened? In the midst of their despair, after they had given up all hope, God used Paul to speak to their deepest need, their need for hope.

Think with me now. Isn't it true that God's word is most precious when all hope appears lost? What Paul related to them was God's word for their unique situation. I wonder; how often has God done that for you when you have lost hope? Many of us have been awed by a specific passage of scripture that seemed at the time to be written just to us in the midst of our storms, precisely when all hope was gone.

Paul's faith, his calm demeanor, and the word of God gave him the platform from which they listened to him. Verse 34: "I urge you to take some food; it will give you strength, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you." Verse 36: "Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves."

The rest of the story is very straightforward. Verse 41: “Then striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground.” Immediately following that, Paul intervened in order to save the other prisoners with the final outcome of their deliverance described at the end of verse 44: “And so it was that all were brought safely to land.”

Now as I mentioned at the outset, this chapter is action-packed from start to finish. But as we have seen, their experiences reveal a number of principles that I am certain apply for us in our day. Let me bring all of this to a close by summarizing seven points of application.

First, storms come to everyone. No one is exempt. And further, we must never interpret the storms we experience as God’s disfavor. All of God’s children are meant to become more and more like Jesus Christ and the storms we encounter are one means God uses to make that happen. We must pass through them in order for that to occur.

Second, during seasons of calm, we must go deep with the Lord because we never know when the calm will be suddenly interrupted by the tempestuous winds of life.

Third, God is sovereign. He’s in control of the onset, the severity, the duration and the means of deliverance from storms. He determines who passes through the storm with us and what we may lose during the storm. He may bring us to the place of losing every semblance of safety and security before we are delivered.

Fourth, do what you can as the winds blow. There is a place to seek help and make changes in an attempt to find safety and release from the storms. Yet in doing so, we must utterly embrace the sovereignty of God in the midst of what we are facing.

Fifth, God’s word sustains us and brings us hope. We must find our hope in the word of God. God may send us an angel in the form of another person to be the instrument whereby we maintain hope even after all seems hopeless and we have given up entirely. And further, never underestimate that God may use you as an angel in the life of another who has given up hope. Don’t you think Paul’s experience with previous storms helped him maintain hope and equipped him to minister to others? In other words, don’t waste your storms or underestimate how God may use them to equip you to serve as an angel for another person.

Sixth, don’t be surprised at how God delivers you from the storm. Yes, it may mean the loss of much of what has become safe and familiar, but he is sovereign over how he provides deliverance. I want you to listen very carefully now. There is never a time when the loss of something means the end of God working for your good. Never! Release for them meant the loss of the ship, but it was that loss that provided for their deliverance.

And then finally, one way or another you will be brought safely to land. In God’s way, in his timing and by his means, the storm will yield and calm will return. Jesus himself will bring you to a place of peace, a place of calm waters, either here or when you see him face to face in that place where there are no more storms to endure.

I know that some of you are in midst of a raging storm right now. You are not alone. You stand in a great company of brothers and sisters in Christ who have weathered the typhoons of life. As someone once wrote: "Though winds are wild,/And the gale unleashed,/My trusting heart still sings;/I know that they mean no harm to me;/He rides upon their wings"  
(From *Streams in the Desert*, p. 111, March 12).