

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 the last passage Paul proclaimed the gospel to King Agrippa, challenging him to repent and accept Jesus as his Savior. Outwardly, Paul was a prisoner. But inwardly, Paul was free to preach the gospel. Paul was free to shepherd others. It was because he had hope in the resurrection. With this hope, Paul committed his life to God's mission and suffered much. In the end, he could say, "I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven." May God help each of us to have the same resurrection hope in Jesus Christ. May God help each of us to say in the end, "I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven."

In this passage today, Paul begins his journey from Caesarea to Rome. Along the way he experiences a storm and a shipwreck. During these trying events, God is with him. God visits him through his angel and speaks to him. God uses the storm to prepare Paul for what awaits him in Rome. It was God's grace to Paul. God's grace overflowed to his fellow travelers. Today let's accept God's grace in the storm.

First, "...instead of listening to what Paul said..." (1-12).

Look at verse 1. Finally, it was decided to send Paul to Rome. Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment, and they put out to sea, bound for Italy. The personal pronoun "we" begins to appear again. This indicates that Luke was with Paul. This account is Luke's eyewitness testimony. It is precise and detailed. Some people wonder why this long story about the voyage to Rome appears in the book of Acts. To Luke, it was indeed significant. May God help us understand why.

Verse 2 mentions Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica. He was a member of Paul's world mission journey to Jerusalem (Ac 20:4). He had been persecuted in the riot in Ephesus (Ac 19:29). Paul recognized him as a fellow prisoner (Col 4:10), and a fellow worker (Phil 1:24). Paul did not look down on his young coworker. Paul respected him and was grateful for his partnership in the sufferings of Christ.

The next day the ship landed at Sidon. Centurion Julius allowed Paul to go to his friends who could provide for his needs. From Sidon, they put out to sea again. The winds were against them. Anyway, they landed at Myra in Lycia. There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship bound for Italy and they set sail in it. The journey was slowed by the elements; it was only with much difficulty that they arrived off Cnidus. From there, they wanted to sail due west to the Greek peninsula, but the wind would not allow them to. They were forced almost due south and ended up on Crete in a place called Fair Havens.

The journey had not gone well. It was getting late in the year, and 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." Humanly, Paul was a prisoner. Nevertheless, Paul was God's servant. Paul was also a seasoned traveler. But the centurion, instead of listening to Paul, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. Since the harbor at Fair Havens was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided to sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and harbor there.

Here Luke stresses the fact that the advice of a man of God was ignored and the advice of worldly people was followed. The decision was popular with most people. But it was a wrong decision. The pilot represents the professional opinion. However, his judgment was clouded by his desire, and that of his men, to enjoy the night life of Phoenix. Luke, the historian, notes that this was a majority decision. The majority is not always right. This is an important lesson for the democratically minded. It is much better to listen to one man who stands on God's word than to many counselors who are slaves of sin.

Second, "we finally gave up all hope of being saved" (13-20).

Verse 13 says, "When a gentle south wind began to blow, they thought they had obtained what they wanted; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete." A gentle south wind represents a favorable situation. Most people follow a favorable situation. They lack the spiritual insight and moral courage to follow the truth. They trust their senses. However, the situation can change suddenly.

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." Men want to live in the illusion that they rule their own destiny and can do what they want to do. But this is not true. The men in the ship were caught by the storm. They could not sail from Fair Havens to Phoenix though it was only 34 miles. Instead, they were driven south. As the storm gained intensity, they had to haul in their lifeboat and secure it. They passed ropes under the ship to hold it together. Fear came into their hearts. They envisioned running aground on the sandbars of Syrtis. So they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. The ship took a violent battering. They began to throw the cargo overboard, fulfilling what Paul had warned them of. Then they began to throw the ship's tackle overboard. This probably refers to the main sail and other rigging. 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 and owner and overconfident sailors reached their human limits. After doing everything they could, they despaired. This is the destiny of man without God.

Many young people follow the American dream without much thought. During college they only want to study well to get a good job. So they have no time to think deeply about their life direction; they never write a life testimony. After graduation, they are busy to establish their careers and their families. Then one day, they wake up and find they are not young any more. Whatever money they made is not enough. Their family relationships are temporal and generally shallow. The world that appeared so big and promising in their youth has turned out to be a place of broken dreams and empty illusion. Many are left only with the thought that they worked hard for nothing. So they have a mid-life crisis. Such people are dead, even as they walk around in the world. One young man has consistently ignored the advice of a man of God. He has a fixed idea that using human freedom to enjoy a pleasure-seeking life is the way to happiness. He wants to follow the bad advice of Jean Jacques Rousseau instead of godly advice. His destiny is despair.

Third, God's angel visits Paul (21-26).

The men on the ship went a long time without food. It was not because they were having fasting prayer. It was because despair and the constant suspense robbed their appetites. Then 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 rebuked them from a shepherd's heart.

Then Paul promised that not one of them would be lost. How could he do this? It was because God was with him.

Look at verses 23-24. "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.'" The angel's first words were, "Do not be afraid, Paul." Even Paul was struggling with fear in the midst of the storm. As of first importance, the Lord helped Paul overcome the fear in his heart. To any person, overcoming fear is crucial. Fear is planted by the devil's lying tongue. Fear paralyzes men. Paralyzed men are useless. They also displease God, for the cowardly are first on the list of those who go to hell (Rev 21:8). A noted psychiatrist, M. Scott Peck, has observed that fear is often at the root of mental illness. Many of his patients faced some reality that frightened them; usually it was a responsibility of some kind. Instead of confronting it and overcoming it, they withdrew and became crooked in their thinking. There are so many mentally ill people in the United States. Without overcoming fear, human beings cannot function normally. How then can we overcome fear? Let's learn from this passage. Look at verse 24 again. When Paul heard God's word, "Do not be afraid, Paul," the Holy Spirit came to dwell in Paul's soul. Romans 8:15 says, "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba,' Father." The Holy Spirit drove out fear and renewed the love of God in Paul's heart. 1 John 4:18a says, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear...." God's love, expressed through the Holy Spirit, is the antidote to fear.

Next, the angel reminded Paul of God's plan for him to stand trial before Caesar. God had given Paul the vision to go to Rome. God had promised him that he must testify in Rome (Ac 23:11). God had not changed his plan. God reminded Paul of his unchanging purpose for him. In the midst of storms, God reminds us of our purpose of life. Many young people struggle with desires of the flesh. Sometimes these desires are so strong that they seem to be the driving force of life. But this is not so. God's calling and God's purpose are the driving force of one's life. We must listen to God's word. We did not choose God, but God chose us as members of a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Even when the struggle seems to be futile, we must remember God's purpose for choosing 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." This was a kind of bonus. These men did not deserve to be saved from the storm. They had ignored the word of God's servant. They were bent on pursuing their own sinful pleasure. They were proud. They should have died in the storm, as Paul had foretold. But God wanted to spare Paul. And in his grace, God also decided to spare the men sailing with him. Because of Paul's life of mission, the grace of God came to these 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." Here we see that Paul combined the angel's message with faith. Paul took hold of God's promise and said, "Amen." When God gives us his word of promise, we must accept it and begin to act on it. Paul's faith in God's promise was the power source that made him strong and courageous. During storms we must listen to God's word and combine it with faith.

Fourth, Paul's good influence and spiritual leadership (27-44).

Paul's words of faith and courage brought hope to all on board. Probably, they didn't mind his rebuking because they tasted hope in his words. Shortly, they sensed that land was near. Then the sailors

construed a plot. They pretended to be lowering an anchor, but they really lowered the lifeboat. They planned to jump into it, abandoning the ship. It was a selfish and irresponsible plan. Men whose only desire is to save their lives in this world 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. Though a prisoner in chains, Paul was the true leader in the time of crisis. It was because of his faith.

Paul saw what needed to be done. Paul also had a shepherd's heart to think about the men. They had not eaten for a long time. They needed strength to swim ashore. So Paul encouraged them to eat and promised, "Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head." This was an absolute promise. It was the expression of Paul's faith in God. Actually, it is an incredible promise. Even when we take a shower, we lose many hairs from our heads. But Paul promised that even though they had to go through the waters not one hair from their heads would be lost. His faith in God's promise was absolute.

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. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves." Paul's act of thanksgiving 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 word. He was thankful for God's world salvation work. He was thankful because he loved God. 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." After being encouraged, they could eat well for the first time in many days.

Dr. Isaac Baek has been unemployed recently. His family has survived on meager resources. However, God has helped him and his wife to study the word of God deeply and trust in God's promise. Last week, Dr. Baek made a presentation for a job interview at Rush Hospital. He prayed for God's help, even as a representative prayer servant last Sunday. He also practiced hard. After the presentation, an interviewer commented, "Your presentation was very professional." Then they treated him to lunch with the group. Dr. Baek testified that his sandwich was delicious. Eating well in a stressful situation is possible for those who have faith in God's promise.

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. Otherwise they had to forfeit their own lives. 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. God made Paul's words come true, both words of warning and words of salvation. Finally, even a Roman centurion was obedient to him. This encouraged Paul as he approached Rome. Whatever might happen, Paul knew that God is the sovereign Ruler of the world. Paul knew that God was fulfilling his world mission purpose. This event also encouraged the Christian church. Persecution was about to come upon them. But God would be with them as he had been with Paul. The storms of life are times of God's mysterious good work. God uses them for world salvation. God is gracious in the storms of life. May God help each one of us to listen to his word, put our faith in his promise, and experience his grace.