

GOD AND SHIPWRECKS

by Ray C. Stedman

If any of you are sailors, or lovers of the sea, I know you will be particularly interested in the passage to which we have come this morning in our studies in the book of Acts. The twenty-seventh chapter is a fascinating account by Dr. Luke of Paul's voyage to Rome, and of the shipwreck which occurred on the way. Luke was not a sailor; he was a landsman. And yet he was such a careful historian that the detail which he gives in this chapter about ancient methods of sailing affords more insight into sailing practices on the Mediterranean in the first century than all other ancient manuscripts put together.

The chapter divides itself readily into four major movements which we will look at together. The first one reads almost like a page out of a ship's log. It gives us the list of important passengers on this voyage and also explains some of the problems they faced as they began to sail from Caesarea to Rome. Thus the story begins on a note which is characteristic of it all the way through -- there are difficulties and delays in this voyage.

You remember that Paul had been committed to appear before the emperor Nero as a result of his appeal to Caesar after finding it impossible to obtain justice in the courts of the governors of Judea. He is now on his way to Rome to appear before the emperor, still a prisoner, still in the custody of the military, still chained for much of the time to a Roman guard.

Luke tells us:

And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort, named Julius. And embarking in a ship of Adramyttium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica. The next day we put in at Sidon; and Julius treated Paul kindly, and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for. {Acts 27:1-3 RSV}

Here are the major personalities we will meet in this chapter. Paul, of course, is central in all of this story, as he is throughout the latter portion of Acts. He is delivered to the charge of a centurion named Julius whom we have not met previously but who appears to be a very kindhearted individual who treats Paul with great courtesy and respect throughout this voyage. Julius obviously does not regard Paul as a common criminal but as a political prisoner worthy of consideration. The centurion belongs to the Augustan Cohort of the Roman military establishment which is a very prestigious unit, a picked body of soldiers responsible directly to the emperor himself, and he has considerable authority as a result. With them travels Dr. Luke who was obviously invited to go along because he was Paul's personal physician. Many scholars have felt that this helps to confirm the fact that the apostle was suffering from physical difficulty and needed his physician with him.

The other person mentioned is Aristarchus, a young man whom Paul had met in Thessalonica on his second missionary journey and who now faithfully accompanies the apostle wherever he goes. The interesting thing about his presence here is that because Paul was a prisoner it was necessary, most scholars feel, for Aristarchus to be Paul's slave in order to accompany the apostle on this voyage. So great was his love of Paul and so strong was his desire to minister to his needs that he volunteered to serve in that capacity.

They have found a little vessel which is beating its way up the coast of Palestine toward what today we call Asia Minor or Turkey. Now the voyage continues as they sail from Sidon:

And putting to sea from there we sailed under the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us. And when we had sailed across the sea which is off Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra in Lycia. There the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy, and put us on board. We sailed slowly for a number of days, and arrived with

difficulty off Cnidus, and as the wind did not allow us to go on we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone. Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea. {Acts 27:4-8 RSV}

They immediately encounter contrary winds. The winds at this particular time of year usually blew from the northeast which would have helped them on their way to Rome. But for some reason this time they met nothing but a constant, strong northwest wind, blowing exactly opposite the direction they wanted to go and making it necessary for them to duck behind the island of Cypress and then to hug the Asian coast, tacking against the wind.

They finally arrive at the Lycian port of Myra where they find a much larger vessel, probably 120 feet or more long -- fairly large even by modern standards. This was a grain ship carrying wheat from Egypt, the granary of the Roman Empire. Driven also by the contrary winds, it had been forced to put into port here on this coast. The centurion evidently leases the vessel because he is in charge of it for the rest of the voyage.

But once again they run into contrary winds and with great difficulty make very slow progress, having to tack back and forth, zigzagging in their course. After several days of sailing they have made only a couple hundred miles and must slide down under the lee of the island of Crete in order to make any headway at all.

The difficulty they met raises a question which we will face increasingly as we go through this chapter: Why would the apostle experience such grave difficulty from natural forces when he is obviously in the center of the will of God, on the way to Rome where the Lord wants him to be? The Lord Jesus had appeared to Paul in Jerusalem and had told him that he wanted him to go to Rome, that he would take him there, and that he must appear before the emperor. And Paul is not disobedient; he is moving right in accord with God's purpose. Nevertheless the winds are contrary and everything else seems to go wrong on this voyage. God, who controls the winds and the waves, could surely have made it easy for Paul to get to Rome.

The question with which this confronts us is one which we all face: Why is it that, even when we are doing what we take to be God's will for us, we oftentimes still have such great difficulty in accomplishing it? We are going to face the implications of that before we get to the end of the chapter, but there is still a lot more difficulty ahead.

The second major movement takes us through Verse 20 and tells us of the divisions and the dangers that they encounter on the voyage:

As much time had been lost, and the voyage was already dangerous because the fast had already gone by, Paul advised them, saying, "Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives." But the centurion paid more attention to the captain and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. And because the harbor was not suitable to winter in, the majority advised to put to sea from there, on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, looking northeast and southeast, and winter there. {Acts 27:9-12 RSV}

You notice that even though Paul is a prisoner he is given considerable freedom. In fact, when he gives some advice about the voyage he is heard very courteously. His counsel is based not upon an exercise of the gift of prophecy but simply upon basic common sense. He says that it is too late in the year to try to make it to Rome. The fast has already occurred. That is a reference to the great fast on the Day of Atonement of the Jews, which means that it is early October and they are soon to face the blast of late fall and winter when sailing on the Mediterranean is very dangerous indeed. Sudden storms can rise without warning and last sometimes for days. Paul, knowing this, advises that they winter in the little port where they are.

But he is met immediately with a difference of opinion. The captain and the owner of the ship, who are aboard, and the majority of the crew differ with him. Luke is careful to record the reason why. They had taken one look around at the dinky little town of Fair Haven and had decided that this was no place to spend a winter. They would be bored with no way of amusing themselves and so they want to get out of there and into a more exciting place. It is obvious they have their own comfort and convenience at heart rather than the safety of the

ship. So they prevail upon the centurion, who evidently has the last word, to head for the city of Phoenix, a harbor about fifty miles up the coast of Crete. But as the modern song reminds us, a lot of things can happen before you get to Phoenix. Paul is well aware of that and has warned them, but they pay no attention.

The next section brings us the account of the storm that arose:

And when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close inshore. 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. And running under the lee of a small island called Cauda, we managed with difficulty to secure the boat; after hoisting it up, they took measures to undergird the ship; then, fearing that they should run on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and so were driven. As we were violently storm-tossed, they began next day to throw the cargo overboard; and the third day they cast out with their own hands the tackle of the ship. And when neither sun nor stars appeared for many a day, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned. {Acts 27:13-20 RSV}

What a tremendous gale struck! And yet it had all begun so encouragingly with the south wind blowing softly. You can see that human nature has not changed one bit. As soon as these sailors found a fair day they immediately cast all caution to the winds and believed what they wanted to believe -- that this fair weather would last -- despite all facts to the contrary and so they ventured out of the harbor.

How many times we have been fooled by some seemingly favorable circumstance which because we want to do something badly enough we take to be a good omen and so we plunge ahead despite the facts.

They had no sooner gotten outside the limits of the harbor than a tremendous tempest blew in, a northeaster blowing away from the land, one of the sudden storms that spring up in the late fall on the Mediterranean yet to this day. The violence of the storm is underscored by Luke's account. The wind was so strong right from the beginning that they could not sail against it and get back to the island even though they were still close to shore. So they had to let the ship be driven before the wind.

Then they had a hard time hoisting the lifeboat into the ship. They didn't carry them aboard in those days, they pulled them behind until a storm came up. But the sea was so violent that they couldn't secure it. It was only when they ran under the lee of a small island and got out of the wind a little bit that they were able to do so, and even then only with great difficulty.

They even found it necessary to take cables and slide them under the ship and tie it up like a package in order to hold it together. The weight of the grain, shifting in the wildness of the storm, threatened to tear the ship apart and without this undergirding they never would have survived as long as they did. Finally, Luke tells us, they lowered all the sails so that the wind would have as little purchase as possible and in this way they tried to ride out the storm.

But they were still afraid that they would be driven onto the great sand banks called the Syrtis which lined the coast of north Africa and where the ship would be marooned miles out from shore. This was one of the most feared hazards of sailing on the Mediterranean. As the storm increased in fury their despair began to grow. They threw overboard much of the cargo and then even the mainsail and its tackle.

As Luke tells us, "when neither sun nor stars appeared for many a day," they gave up hope. This was a terrible handicap to them because these ancient navigators had no compass nor any other instrument. The only way they could guide the ship was by the sun and stars. When they could not see them for many days they lost all knowledge of their whereabouts. They were drifting helplessly before a howling gale in the midst of a turbulent sea with no idea where they were headed. And so at last they gave up all hope of being saved.

Luke's account suggests that even the Apostle Paul gave up hope of surviving this voyage -- at least on this ship. Along with the rest of them, he despaired of avoiding shipwreck, although, of course, he knew that he would get to Rome in some way or other because God had promised him that. But it was a perilous situation.

Again we must raise the question: Why all this difficulty when the apostle is fulfilling the will of God? The situation gets worse and worse as it goes along! What is happening? Why do these discouraging circumstances keep piling up?

Well, the third movement will answer this, at least in part. Here we have the sudden interjection of encouragement and promise:

As they had been long without food, Paul then came forward among them and said, "Men, you should have listened to me, and should not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. I now bid you take heart; for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and lo, 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. But we shall have to run on some island." {Acts 27:21-26 RSV}

Luke has taken note of the distress of these men. They had for many days been so upset and anxious over the outcome of this voyage that fear had destroyed their appetites and they had not eaten. In the midst of that, our version says, the apostle came forward. But in Greek the words are literally "he stood forth" -- he stood out among them, with a different attitude and point of view.

When Paul stands before these men and says, "You should have listened to me," he is not merely indulging in an "I told you so." He is trying to awaken them to the obvious evidence that what he had said before was right, and thus he is encouraging them to pay attention to what he says now because it is a very startling message. Despite all the contrary evidence around them on every side, Paul announces with absolute conviction, "There will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship."

His reason for saying so, he says, is that an angel had come to him just the night before and encouraged him with the message that he was going to stand before Caesar and that he was not to be afraid. This indicates that fear had begun to creep even into the apostle's heart. But he is reassured by the angelic messenger.

And furthermore the angel had said, "God has granted you all those who sail with you." In the phrase "God has granted you," you can see what Paul has been doing. He has been praying for these others, praying that the sailors and soldiers accompanying him would be spared as well as that his own object would be accomplished on this trip. God heard his prayer and granted him their lives.

This incident is given to us in order to show us the tremendous power that a man of faith exercises. I wish I could get this across to people today. I have a feeling that none of us, myself included, has any idea of the amount of power God has committed to us in the instrument of prayer. He does such mighty things if we will but ask him. Remember that James says, "You have not because you ask not," {cf, Jas 4:2b}. God stands ready to grant us much, much more than we have ever dreamed about.

I have often said from this platform that the church is really the secret government of earth, and that it has power to control the current events which happen around us, the events reported in our newspapers. We sometimes feel that we are just helpless pilgrims drifting through this age, waiting to get to heaven some day. But the Scriptures never portray a Christian that way. He is intimately related to the events happening around him and he has great control over them.

This is why James also says, "The prayer of a righteous man [literally] releases great power," {cf, Jas 5:16}. And here God granted this one man, because of his prayer, the lives of the two hundred seventy-five individuals who sailed with him. They were spared because Paul prayed for them. What a revelation of the power of prayer!

Notice also the secret help given to the believer in time of distress. Paul was exposed to the same peril as these other men, and yet God strengthened him with a word of encouragement in the midst of the trial. He didn't

take him away from it. The storm was no less severe for Paul than it was for anyone else. The danger was just as evident, the waves were just as high, the darkness just as intense, the apparent hope just as absent from the circumstances for him as it was for them. Everything was exactly the same except that God granted to him an encouraging word, a secret knowledge that the others did not possess. He didn't lessen the pressure but he gave an inward reassurance that enabled Paul to stand out from the rest of them and be different.

This is indicative of what the Christian faith is all about. It is a way of discovering hidden resources, secret resources which others do not know about, which make it possible for you to live and to act and react differently from those around you. That is the characteristic of Christianity. That is what it is supposed to be like all the time.

This last week I was down in Pasadena at Fuller Theological Seminary. Mr. Bill Pannell, a black evangelist associated with Tom Skinner, was speaking at the chapel. I was struck by what he was saying. He was reminding us all that Christianity is different. It does not operate on the same principles upon which the world lives. He was illustrating this by the remarkable event in our Lord's life which we call the "triumphal entry."

Today is Palm Sunday. Traditionally this was the day during our Lord's last week when he entered Jerusalem. Mr. Pannell was pointing out how different this occasion was from what we moderns would have made it if we had been in charge. He said that if he had been in charge it would have looked much more like the Rose Bowl parade. His view of the way to bring a king into a city would be much more like the concepts of the committee for the Tournament of Roses in Pasadena. He would have brought him in on a white horse with a beautiful silver-mounted saddle and with a long retinue in his train. And there would have been a band, perhaps even a Scottish bagpipe band, to go before him and introduce him.

But our Lord did not choose that. His method was to ride into town on a jackass, on a donkey. He did it that way in order to illustrate that he operates on a totally different basis. The values which the world places upon something are rejected by God. Luke tells us in his Gospel that Jesus once said that the things which are highly esteemed among men are an abomination in the sight of God {cf, Luke 15:15}. You get that contrast all through the Gospels.

We need to capture this note again today. The Christian lives by a different principle. That is why, in the midst of circumstances which would panic others, the Christian is expected to be calm. We are not to reflect the panic, the anxiety, and the troubled countenance which others display when they get into difficulty. As Rudyard Kipling describes it in his famous poem: "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you," then that is Christianity because a resource is granted to you which others know nothing about.

I am afraid that today too many Christians follow the modern version of that line: "If you can keep your head when others are losing theirs, you just don't understand the situation!" But Paul understood the situation, and he kept his head and stood out among them, distinctive because of his faith. Notice his confident word: "So take heart, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told." That is faith.

The remainder of the chapter gives us the story of the disaster that occurred and the deliverance which followed:

When the fourteenth night had come, as we were drifting across the sea of Adria, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. So they sounded and found twenty fathoms; a little farther on they sounded again and found fifteen fathoms. And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let out four anchors from the stern, and prayed for day to come. And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the boat into the sea, under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the boat, and let it go. {Acts 27:27-32 RSV }

Things seem to get worse and worse as this story goes on. Not only do they face the terrible dangers of the

storm, but, as they drift on under the leaden skies, they hear the frightening roar of breakers in the distance. They do not know where they are nor what kind of strange land they might be coming upon nor what kind of shore it will have. (We know today that they were approaching the island of Malta but they did not know that.) It is pitch dark and in the middle of the night, which adds to their anxiety. As they hear the breakers pounding against the rocks they are afraid that the ship will be broken to pieces and all their lives will be lost.

So they cast out some anchors from the stern to slow the drift of the ship, and pray that they will hold it offshore at least until daybreak when they can look out into the unfathomable darkness to see the kind of unknown peril they are coming upon. You can sense, can't you, the terror of their hearts as they do not know what was going to happen!

And then to make matters worse the sailors hatch a little plot of their own to abandon ship and save their own skins, leaving the rest to get by as best they can. They decide that they will get into the boat and under the pretense of letting out more anchors, they will simply row ashore and leave the ship to its fate. We are not told how, but somehow (again, God's man in the right place at the right time) Paul learns of this plot and says to the centurion, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." He knows that the ship cannot be beached properly unless the sailors who know how to handle it are there. And, military man that he is, the centurion acts promptly. He commands the soldiers to cut the rope and let the boat drift off. So they are all stuck in the same boat together.

The interesting thing about this is that God had promised Paul that every life would be spared. Yet Paul could say to the centurion, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you will not be saved." God's promise includes man's activity. Man's actions are the means by which God works out his promises. God's announced purpose never cancels out man's activity in that direction. This is very instructive to learn.

The fact that God announces what the end result is going to be does not mean that men are permitted therefore to fold their hands and say, "Well, it's all going to work out some way or another." He intends for us to exercise considerable understanding of a situation, and to act in line with common sense to carrying out his purpose. Paul knows that he must work toward that end, and that the decisions which are taken in working toward it are part of God's means of accomplishing it. So he insists that the sailors stay aboard the ship.

In the next section we have another danger that they face and overcome:

As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food; it will give you strength, since not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you." And when he had said this, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat. Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. (We were in all two hundred and seventy-six persons in the ship.) And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea. {Acts 27:33-38 RSV}

Fourteen days without any food! That is quite a diet. It had reduced this ship's company to a state of physical weakness bordering on helplessness. The reason for their weakness was brought out earlier in the account. They had lost their appetite through fear. They were so frantic about their situation that they had no desire for food. Their physical condition was due to spiritual despair.

This is an interesting revelation of the tie between the physical and the spiritual within us. Because the physical weakness is due to spiritual despair, it is therefore a spiritual cure which permits them to eat. Paul reminds them of the promise of God. He encourages their faith, saying, "Not a hair is going to perish from the head of any of you." And suiting actions to words he takes bread himself, gives thanks, breaks and eats it in front of them. This encourages them all to eat and strengthen their lives.

Here again is the action of the man of faith. In the midst of discouraging circumstances, and discouraged people, he acts on a different basis than they. The result is that they are all encouraged. One man with hope in his heart, and encouragement on his lips, was able to change the whole attitude of two hundred seventy-five

other people so that they ate and were physically prepared for the rigors that lay immediately ahead. That again is the power of faith.

In the last section we see the final threats from nature and from man:

Now when it was day, they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned if possible to bring the ship ashore. So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea, at the same time loosening the ropes that tied the rudders; then hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach. But striking a shoal they ran the vessel aground; the bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was broken up by the surf. The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape; but the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their purpose. He ordered those who could swim to throw themselves overboard first and make for the land, and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all escaped to land. {Acts 27:39-44 RSV}

The bay that they saw when dawn finally came under the heavy skies we now call St. Paul's Bay, on the island of Malta. They decided that it was there or nowhere, and that their only chance was to beach the ship in this little harbor. So they threw overboard everything that would hinder the ship from going in as far as possible and then hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach.

But another natural obstacle looms up and they run aground in a shallow area where two seas meet. The boat is stuck some distance from shore and begins to break up in the surf. They have to abandon ship and jump overboard, those who can swim going first, and the others making it on planks and pieces of the ship.

But that still is not the last peril, especially to the prisoners, for the soldiers decide to kill them all. This is understandable in view of the Roman law which said that any soldier who allowed a prisoner to escape was himself subjected to the same penalty the prisoner would have received. These soldiers were not willing to take that risk, and it was customary to kill prisoners if there was no longer any possibility of guarding them properly.

But once again it is Paul who saves the situation. The centurion, kindhearted, authoritative Julius, because he had come to respect this man, takes the entire responsibility upon himself, countermands the plans of the soldiers, and thus saves the lives of these prisoners, Paul included.

Finally, through the storm and the surf and everything else, they make their way to shore. And, as Paul had been told by God, not a single life is lost. Verse 44 reads almost as a sigh of relief at the end of this chapter: "And so it was that all escaped to land." We can heave that sigh along with them.

Now we have to answer the question: Why do shipwrecks come to us in the midst of doing the will of God?

Why is it that Christians face this kind of difficulty?

This last week I talked with a man who shared with me from his own experience the shipwreck that had occurred in his first marriage. He told me how he had begun it with such high hopes and dreams, and such commitment to God for its success. And yet it had broken, foundered, and been shipwrecked. He shared with me how this tore him, how he did not know what to make of it, how it shattered his faith and challenged his concepts. What searchings of heart this brought to him! What painful reevaluation it had meant!

I could empathize with him as he unfolded to me the bitterness and resentment that stirred in his heart as he struggled with the question which all of us must face at times: Why do these difficulties come when we are doing the right thing? We could understand it if they hit us when we were doing wrong, but why when we are doing right? We are doing what we feel is God's will, but we are still running into such obstacles, such difficulties, such dangers. Why is this?

The Scriptures give several answers which I can relate briefly as we come to the conclusion of this study:

First of all, these difficulties are clearly the result of satanic opposition. In Paul's letter to the Romans he said that he had tried many times to go to Rome and had been prevented, had been hindered. Paul always said it was Satan who had put those hindrances in his path. The enemy did not want Paul in Rome, for that was the strategic center of the empire and also the very headquarters of evil. Satan did not want this mighty apostle, coming in the strength and power of a risen Lord, to move into this city and start breaking down his stronghold of darkness by which he held in grip the entire civilized world. So he delayed him every way he could, fought every step of the way. He sent the contrary winds, the storm, and all the other difficulties that this chapter recites for us.

You and I will never understand the meaning of the difficulties in our lives if we do not set them against the background of satanic opposition, the conflict in which we are all engaged against the powers of darkness. We must remember that.

And yet, having said that, it is also well to remember that God had permitted all this. God is greater and stronger than Satan. His might and power could have canceled out this opposition, had he chosen. He could have made the winds fair and had them blow in the right direction. He could have said to Satan, "This far and no farther. Take your hand off. Stop this hindrance!" But he deliberately did not do it.

Again, Scripture suggests some reasons why God sometimes does not intervene to prevent Satan's work. One is that there were lessons in this for the others who sailed with Paul. Imagine what they learned of a different way of life as they watched this man of faith in the midst of the same perils they were facing. His reaction was so different from theirs. There was a baffling element which was guiding and guarding this man, keeping him stable in the midst of these circumstances. Those watching were impressed by it. And how encouraging Paul could be, how reassuring he was to others. Again and again he was the man in the critical moment who saved the day. They owed their lives to him time and time again before the voyage was over. He showed them that there is a new way of life, different from that which the world lives.

Then the Scriptures indicate there were lessons for Paul in this. He too grew in faith as he learned how faithful God could be, and how he could move in so that things would go only so far, and then, at the critical moment, a line would be drawn. Paul tells us that God's strength is made perfect in man's weakness. "So," he says, "I glory in my infirmity," {cf, 2 Cor 2:9 KJV}. He grew to understand more about the love and grace of God because he went through these dangerous times.

Finally, of course, there is the great story of the book of Job which shows us that, even when there is seemingly no explanation at all in terms of this life for the shipwrecks and disasters which believers go through, there is still that unseen victory occurring which we know nothing about, in realms far beyond the visible, which honors and glorifies God and makes possible great progress and advance in the kingdom of God. You remember that in the book of Job you find Satan and God and Job all there at the beginning. But at the end there are just God and Job. And God says to Job, "I'm responsible for all of this. If you have any questions I'll answer them for you."

How are we ever going to understand what is happening to us unless we accept our circumstances in the light of the reality which Scripture reveals? As I read this account, a verse of Scripture from the Psalms rang over and over in my mind. It is from Psalm 34, Verse 19:

**Many are the afflictions of the righteous;
but the Lord delivers him out of them all. {Psa 34:19 RSV}**

That is the story of life, isn't it? We must expect these shipwrecks. But the Lord delivers us out of them all. The next verse in that psalm is a prophecy of the crucifixion. It says of Jesus,

**He keeps all of his bones;
not one of them is broken. {Psa 34:20 RSV}**

Even through the disaster and shipwreck of the cross, God's forestalling hand was there, allowing it to go only so far, limiting it, controlling it, permitting much darkness and disaster, agony and bloodshed, but

nevertheless solidly in control, undergirding and carrying him through.

So, as we look at this story of the shipwreck of Paul, and at the voyage of life which all of us are taking, we have to say, as many of us have learned to say through the years, "Everything went wrong, but it all turned out right."

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, we thank you for the reminder from this chapter that life is intended to be filled with difficulties and dangers, perils, and even shipwrecks at times, and that it is through all these that we make our way, learning great lessons along the way to your heavenly kingdom. And so, as we think of Paul and the brave company on that ship so long ago, we see our own lives in perspective. If even an apostle was given such difficulties to face, such darkness and uncertainty and danger, should we complain at the little trials which are given to us? Help us to understand that they all have their purposes. May we all sing from the depths of our hearts the words of that old hymn:

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
we have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought us safe thus far,
and grace will lead us home.

We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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