

HOW TO WEATHER THE STORMS OF LIFE

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

by Ron Ritchie

My good friend Jack called me last Tuesday. I sensed immediately that his heart was heavy with grief. Some months ago his wife Cindie had become pregnant for the first time after years of waiting on the Lord to start a family, but Jack called to say that they had just been told by the doctors that their baby would have extremely serious birth defects.

This couple attended Peninsula Bible Church for a decade, and Jack was disciplined here before he moved to Northern California with his company. There he was invited to become an elder in his local church. He has kept good ties with PBC so it was only natural for him to telephone upon receiving this sad news. The doctors have discovered that there is a problem with the baby's chromosomes. He would be severely retarded and would not live very long after birth. Jack asked if we would pray for them during this difficult time. They were feeling the effects of the winds of the world advising them to have an abortion and thus avoid the stress and strain of caring for a handicapped child. During our conversation he never once mentioned his own personal storm: last year he discovered that he had multiple sclerosis. This Christian couple are facing a severe storm. We need to hold them up in prayer that they will trust God and that his name will be glorified.

All of us are familiar with natural weather storms, whether they be lightning, snow, wind storms or whatever. Storms can be unpredictable and dangerous. Violent weather can bring indiscriminate death and destruction. These weather storms are symbolic of the more intense storms that blow in the hearts of men and women, believer and unbeliever alike, in every age. Even if we are not in the midst of some physical, emotional, spiritual, financial, business, family or marriage storm at this moment, we all know of someone who is facing such a storm.

This is the subject I want to address this morning. How can we weather the storms of life in such a way that our Lord Jesus Christ will be glorified as others watch us clinging to the Savior? The apostle Paul and his companions Luke and Aristarchus will be our spiritual models as we look at Acts 27. They are on board an Egyptian grain ship bound for Italy, their passage paid by the government of Rome. The apostle was a prisoner of the Roman Empire for allegedly starting a riot in the temple area in Jerusalem. After being secretly moved to Caesarea, he was accused by the High Priest before Felix, the Roman Governor.

At a second trial two years later Paul was forced into a corner by the governor so he appealed to Caesar. Felix's successor Festus invited King Agrippa and his wife Bernice to listen to Paul in a public arena for the purpose of forming some acceptable political charges before shipping him to Rome. Paul, however, used the opportunity to witness of his faith in Jesus of Nazareth. Festus, Agrippa and Bernice rejected the apostle's invitation to place their faith in Jesus as the Messiah, and so arrangements were made to ship him some 2,000 miles away to Rome. It was September of the year 59 A.D.

This would be no two-week cruise on one of the Caribbean Princess liners, however, where people eat and dance every night and shop to their hearts' content in nine different ports of call. This six-month voyage, from September of 59 through March of 60 A.D., would be filled with danger and adventure. Our storyteller Luke makes sure that we do not miss any of the details.

In Acts 27:1-8, Luke sets the stage for the 2,000-mile journey to Rome. The key personnel are Paul, Luke, Aristarchus (a Macedonian of Thessalonica), Julius (a Roman cohort), the pilot and captain, and some 270 soldiers, sailors and prisoners 276 persons in all on board the 140 foot grain ship which was fitted with one mast and one square sail. The ship first set sail northwards for Sidon, then westward between the island of Cyprus and the coast of Turkey. They changed ships in Myra, Turkey, and sailed southwest toward the shelter of Crete until they came to a place on the south side of the island called Fair Havens.

As you read this account you sense the storm clouds building and the winds becoming stronger and more violent and dangerous. To indicate this, Luke uses the following phrases throughout the account: "the winds were contrary" (verse 4), "the wind did not permit us to go farther" (verse 7), "with difficulty sailing" (verse 8), "moderate south wind" (verse 13), "violent wind" (verse 14), "violently storm-tossed" (verse 18), "neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm was assailing us" (verse 20), "being driven about" (verse 27), "hit a reef" (verse 9), "ship broke up" (verse 10).

How can we weather the storms of life? In verses 9 through 20 we discover that we must,

I. Realize God's purposes behind the storms 27:9-20

And when considerable time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous, since even the fast was already over, Paul began to admonish them, and said to them, "Men, I perceive that the voyage will certainly be attended with damage and great loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives." But the centurion was more persuaded by the pilot and the captain of the ship, than by what was being said by Paul. And because the harbor was not suitable for wintering, the majority reached a decision to put out to sea from there, if somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, facing northeast and southeast, and spend the winter there.

And when a moderate south wind came up, supposing that they had gained their purpose, they weighed anchor and began sailing along Crete, close inshore. But before very long there rushed down from the land a violent wind, called Euraquilo; and when the ship was caught in it, and could not face the wind, we gave way to it, and let ourselves be driven along. And running under the shelter of a small island called Clauda, we were scarcely able to get the ship's boat under control. And after they had hoisted it up, they used supporting cables in undergirding the ship; and fearing that they might run aground on the shallows of Syrtis, they let down the sea anchor, and so let themselves be driven along. The next day as we were being violently storm-tossed, they began to jettison the cargo; and on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. And since neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm was assailing us, from then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned.

This was not the apostle's first voyage, nor was it his first shipwreck on the Mediterranean Sea. He had been in three wrecks already (2 Cor. 11:25). While he was in Fair Haven he realized that the Feast of Atonement was over, having been held on October 5, 59 A.D., and that dangerous weather was imminent. So the prisoner of Jesus Christ felt compelled to sound a warning, first addressing the economic factor and then the human factor. Verse 10: "Men, I perceive that the voyage will certainly be attended with damage and great loss, not only of the cargo and the ship but also of our lives. "

However, the Roman centurion Julius, who had the last word, was more persuaded by the pilot, the captain and the majority vote of the crew. So they sailed away from Fair Havens, westward along the south side of Crete in order to avoid the northeast winds, hoping to arrive at the safe harbor of Phoenix, Crete.

But the moderate southerly turned into a violent wind which blew them off their westward course south to the island of Clauda. Luke records that the ship began breaking up. They had to undergird it, fearing they might run aground, but even while dragging the anchor they were out of control. As they were being blown westward they started throwing the cargo and tackle overboard. To make matters even more dangerous, the sun and stars were blocked out by the violent storm clouds so they lost their ability to get a fix for direction. They did not know where they were. Luke adds these ominous words, "from then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned." Luke, Paul and Aristarchus all felt this.

We find the spiritual principles behind these events in Psalm 107, verses 23-27 :

Those who go down to the sea ships,

Who do business on great waters;
They have seen the works of the Lord,
And His wonders in the deep.
For He spoke and raised up a stormy wind,
Which lifted up the waves of the sea.
They rose up to the heavens, they went down to the depths;
Their soul melted away in their misery.
They reeled and staggered like a drunken man,
And were at their wits' end.

Here we discover that the storm which Paul and his companions were caught in was caused by the spoken word of God in order to bring men to a place where their souls melted, where they were at their wits' end and they had nothing or no one to turn to on board for security. Their ship, which a few hours earlier was their security, was breaking up. Any self-confidence they had before they boarded was gone. They were like drunken men cast upon a sea of uncertainty, helpless and hopeless, looking into the very eyes of death.

Our Lord allows storms to come into our lives for a variety of reasons. For unbelievers, some storms are sent so that men will cry out to God for salvation. In the case of believers, God uses storms for several reasons, as we see recorded in the lives of Job and Jonah, and in the lives of the disciples of Jesus in the New Testament.

In the case of Job, God permitted Satan to send a storm against the house in which Job's ten sons and daughters were having a party. The house collapsed, killing all his children. In his grief, Job did not know that God had allowed this apparent tragic storm on earth in order to show Satan that Job was God's servant and there was none like him on the earth, "a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil" Have you ever realized that you may be God's instrument to demonstrate to Satan that you are a blameless and righteous man or woman? We do not think in those terms but we need to.

In the case of Jonah, God had asked his prophet to preach against the wickedness of Nineveh but Jonah boarded a ship and headed to Tarshish hoping to hide from the presence of the Lord. "And the Lord hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up." The sailors discovered from Jonah that he was the reason the storm was on the sea so they threw him overboard, but the Lord sent a large fish to swallow him and throw him up on the beach near Nineveh. The storm was caused by God in order to bring his disobedient servant back into relationship with him so that the wicked inhabitants of Nineveh could repent and be saved.

We have another example of God's using a storm to teach truth in the New Testament. On one occasion Jesus and his disciples got in a boat to head across the Sea of Galilee and as soon as they set sail Jesus fell asleep. Matthew tells us, "Soon there arose a great storm in the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves, but Jesus slept. The disciples awoke Him and said 'save us Lord, we are perishing.' And He said, 'Why are you timid, you men of little faith?' Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and it became perfectly calm." (Matt. 8: 23-27). Jesus allowed this storm to come up so that the disciples would trust him in the midst of it, not in themselves or in the boat. In the same way the Lord allows storms to come in our lives so that we will place our faith in him.

This is why God allowed the storm to blow around Paul and his companions as recorded here in Acts, so that they would trust God and not themselves or the ship.

"From then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned," says verse 20. I know a family here whose business is in a severe storm. It looks as though there is no hope to save it. I know of a husband whose marriage is in a severe storm and he can do nothing to save it. I know of parents here whose children are in a severe storm of rebellion. We need to realize that God is directly or indirectly behind these stormy seasons so that they will bring glory to Him and spiritual maturity to us. All these storms are designed to draw us nearer to our Lord rather than nearer ourselves or what we think is our security.

How can we weather the storms of life? First, we must realize that God has certain purposes in mind and we

need to trust him. It's fascinating to remember that two years earlier God had told Paul that he would witness to him in Rome. The trouble with all of this is that God omitted the details of how this would come about. God does not fill in all the details about what will happen to us along the way. Why would we need faith if he did so? How can we weather the storms of life? Secondly, we need to

II. Realize God's presence during the storms 27: 21-26

And when they had gone a long time without food, then Paul stood up in their midst and said, "Men, you ought to have followed my advice and not to have set sail from Crete, and incurred this damage and loss. And yet now I urge you to keep up your courage, for there shall be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.' Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God, that it will turn out exactly as I have been told. But we must run aground on a certain island."

No one on board had eaten for several days because of seasickness and fear. Paul and his companions were no exception. They realized the situation along with the others, and knew death was staring them in the face.

Then the apostle stood up in their midst and said that they should have listened to him. He was not being arrogant, but wanted to remind them that the warning he had given them was true and he wanted them to listen to him this time when he made the following statement: "now I urge you to keep up your courage, for there shall be no loss of life among you, but only the ship."

I can hear the disbelieving crew responding, "Paul, how can you say that! Look at us: we're like drowned rats! It's all over for us. This is no time for one of your lectures. Our ship is breaking up. It's hopeless. We're doomed."

When the storm was at its worst, Paul's spirit was at its calmest. The reason for his calmness is given in verse 24: "For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you and all those who are sailing with you.'"

Picture yourselves in this violent storm, seasick, terrified, helpless and hopeless, and in the midst of this experience a Roman Jewish prisoner with no authority tells you he has seen and spoken to an angel of his God. How would you react? Surely this poor prisoner is having delusions, you would think. Paul knew how they would react. This is why he added the words "keep up your courage, men, for I believe God, that it will turn out exactly as I have been told. But we must run aground on a certain island. "

The secret of living within a storm is to trust in the presence and power of our Risen Lord over the presence and power of the storm.

A few months ago I learned that my dear brother in Christ Swede Anderson is in the midst of a deadly physical storm in which he was discovered to have a serious form of cancer. My knees buckled at the news! Swede is the one of the most godly men I have ever met. We were classmates at seminary and ministered together for two years before he went on to minister for 25 years with Bill Bright in Campus Crusade for Christ in colleges and then in South America. Then he was appointed to the exciting ministry of director of the Christian Embassy in Washington where he witnessed to the political leaders of our nation. He was in the Third World this year encouraging other Christians to start Christian embassies in their countries when he became ill and was flown home for medical treatment. He went through a serious operation three months ago, knowing that he might wake up in eternity.

I received a letter from him last week in which he mentioned his chemotherapy treatments. He wrote, "This recovery period is a struggle for both Judy and me...but while I am on the bed God in His grace teaches me lessons I need to learn about life and ministry." Swede is still on stormy seas. He will remain under

chemotherapy treatments for the next two years. Knowing the Andersons, however, they will put their trust in the presence and power of our Risen Lord.

How can we weather the storms of life? We must realize God's presence behind the storms; and we must realize God's presence during the storms; thirdly, we must,

III. Realize God's preservation after the storms 2744

But when the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven about in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors began to surmise that they were approaching some land. And they took soundings, and found it to be twenty fathoms; and a little farther on they took another sounding and found it to be fifteen fathoms. And fearing that we might run aground somewhere on the rocks, they cast four anchors from the stern and wished for daybreak.

And as the sailors were trying to escape from the ship, and had let down the ship's boat into the sea, on the pretense of intending to lay out anchors for the bow, Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, "Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved." Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat, and let it fall away. And until the day was about to dawn, Paul was encouraging them all to take some food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have been constantly watching and going without eating, having taken nothing. Therefore I encourage you to take some food, for this is for your preservation; for not a hair from the head of any of you shall perish." And having said this, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of all; and he broke it and began to eat. And all of them were encouraged, and they themselves also took food. And all of us in the ship were two hundred and seventy-six persons.

And when they had eaten enough, they began to lighten the ship by throwing out the wheat into the sea. And when day came, they could not recognize the land; but they did observe a certain bay with a beach, and they resolved to drive the ship onto it if they could. And casting off the anchors, they left them in the sea while at the same time they were loosening the ropes of the rudders, and hoisting the foresail to the wind, they were heading for the beach. But striking a reef where two seas meet, they ran the vessel aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern began to be broken up by the force of the waves. And the soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, that none of them should swim away and escape; but the centurion, wanting to bring Paul safely through, kept them from their intention, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land, and the rest should follow, some on planks, and others on various things from the ship.

And thus it happened that they all were brought safely to land.

Note that after the words of encouragement the Lord did not provide immediate relief for the water-soaked, seasick, weary crew and passengers. It appears that they were being blown westward for some two weeks after leaving Fair Havens. Instead of being able to sail past the tip of Greece north to the west side of Italy, they were forced to sail some 600 miles on open water between Greece on their right and North Africa on their left, with the island of Sicily somewhere straight ahead and to the north. At midnight on the 14th day after leaving Fair Havens they gradually began to hear a new and most welcome sound, the breaking of waves against the shore. Later they would discover it was the island of Malta, some 65 miles south of the tip of Sicily.

They immediately took soundings for the depth, fearing they would be destroyed on the rocks of the shore. Things were so serious that some of the sailors tried to escape by using the dingy. But "Captain" Paul saw what was going on and told the centurion Julius that "unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved."

Then at dawn Paul encouraged them to take food, after some two weeks of not eating, saying, "for the Lord

will preserve all of you and not one hair of your head shall perish."

Taking bread, Paul held a communion service and probably took the opportunity to teach the men the symbolism behind the bread, "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'This is my body which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.'"

By offering communion, the apostle offered hope of being physically saved and the hope that many on board would be spiritually saved.

Because Paul took bread and ate, the 275 men, great and small, freemen and prisoners, were encouraged to take food. Then they lightened the ship and when dawn arrived headed for a cove, but they struck a reef and the ship began to break up. The soldiers were about to kill the prisoners, for if any escaped they would forfeit their own lives, but the centurion stepped in and saved Paul. All jumped off the ship, and some swam while others floated into the beach on planks. "And thus it happened that they all were brought safely to land."

Psalms 107: 28-31:

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
And He brought them out of their distresses.
He caused the storm to be still,
So that the waves of the sea were hushed.
Then they were glad because they were quiet.
So He guided them to their desired haven.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for His loving kindness...

The secret of remaining safe through the storms of life is to place our faith in the Lord, to cry to Him in the midst of storms and not place our confidence in the ship. He is the only one who can preserve us in our distresses. He is the only one who can calm the storms. Once we are brought to safety we are encouraged to give thanks to the Lord because he guided us to a desired haven. He himself is our haven.

Is your health, your marriage, family or business going through a stormy season? Remember that the key to weathering the storms of life is to realize God's purposes behind the storms; realize God's presence during the storms; and realize God's preservation after the storms.

Catalog No. 4111
Acts 27: 1-44
26th Message
Ron R. Ritchie
July 31, 1988

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