



## Practical Faith in the Perfect Storm

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

Everybody loves a journey. Some of my favorite memories as a kid are of my parents waking my brother and I early in the morning, still in our PJ's; they'd pack us into the back of our Country Squire station wagon, and off we'd go in the dark early morning hours with the smell of coffee wafting through the car and dreams of some adventure swimming in our head. What fun!

But sometimes it wasn't so fun. Sometimes the car broke down in the worst places possible. Sometimes we got lost. Sometimes we hit weather that made it practically impossible to see where we were going. And then sometimes the storm was IN the car as my brother and I went at each other in the back seat!

In many ways, the life Jesus calls us to is a journey. It's not a journey in which we travel alone; there are others with us. It's not one in which we just drift along without any sense of what we're doing. We know where we're headed and we have directions on how to get there.

But sometimes we face problems along the way. There are the small bumps on the road but there are also the major disasters and seemingly insurmountable obstacles that confront us. It might be an illness, an issue in your marriage, a financial crisis, or a private battle you're fighting with depression. While we may know that ultimately the Lord himself will see to it that we get to our destination, in the meantime we're not sure what to do. We're not even sure we're going to survive.

The question I want to ask this morning is what does it look like to be a Christian in the midst of one of these giant storms? How do we survive? What practical difference does it make for us and for others who are with us that we know the God of the universe?

Turn with me to Acts 27. We've seen that the apostle Paul is on a journey. He's headed to Rome where he's wanted to go for some time. He longed to preach the gospel there. The Lord has already told him he would be his witness in Rome. But what the Lord didn't mention was he only would get there as a prisoner of the Roman Empire. Paul has already spent two seemingly wasted years in prison in Caesarea. Finally, he's placed in the custody of a Roman Centurion named Julius and they board a ship and begin a journey at sea that will take them to Rome. On the way they will confront what we might call "the perfect storm."

Sometimes the problems we face on our journey are the result of something stupid we've done; they're the natural consequences of bad choices we've made. But sometimes they're not. Sometimes we're smack dab in the will of God, doing exactly what he's called us to do, and one of these storms hits. We wonder, what's God doing? Why is he treating me this way when I'm doing what he told me to

do? This was the case with Paul. And, again, the question is, how did he make it through?

### I. Friendship (vv.1-8).

Let's take a closer look at this incredible journey. We're not going to read every verse of this long chapter but let's start with v.1. **"When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, they proceeded to deliver Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan cohort named Julius."** They started out on the first leg of their journey which would take them from Caesarea to the Lycian port of Myra. Almost right away they encountered contrary winds blowing from the northwest. It was difficult for a coastal vessel to handle the headwinds in the open ocean so the ship sailed around the east end of Cyprus and then hugged the coast of what is now Turkey. In Myra they found a much larger ship, a grain ship carrying wheat from Egypt. They took off from there but again they ran into strong headwinds and made slow progress. After several days of slow sailing they had to go south under the island of Crete in order to make any headway at all. They finally got as far as a port named Fair Havens.

So the trip starts slowly. Luke twice says it was difficult. But there's one thing that would have provided Paul with some comfort. Write down the word friendship. This may surprise you. I hope it doesn't by now. We've come so far with Paul we ought to know that he was a man who made deep and intimate friends wherever he went.

Notice first that Luke, the writer of Acts, is with him. We know that because of Luke's use of the 1st person plural. He says **"when it was decided that WE should sail for Italy...WE put out to sea..."** In one of his letters Paul called Luke "the beloved Physician." Luke may have boarded as the ship's doctor with a mind to attend to Paul's physical needs.

But that's not all. Verse 2 also says they were **"accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica."** Paul had met him on his second missionary journey and now he tagged along with Paul wherever he went. Scholars feel he would have had to serve as Paul's slave in order to accompany him on this voyage. Paul was a prisoner but as a Roman citizen he would be permitted to bring someone like this along.

Then notice v.3. **"The next day we put in at Sidon; and Julius treated Paul with consideration and allowed him to go to his friends and receive care."** It appears that there was a group of believers there. As far as we know Paul had never met them, but there was a bond of friendship regardless. Notice why Paul went to see them: not to care for them but to "receive care." Paul wasn't always the guy who had to be giving to others; there were

times he knew he was weak and vulnerable and needed the help and care of friends.

During one of the hardest times I've ever had in ministry the Lord brought a unique friend into my life. I hadn't seen this guy for 25 years but we had grown up together. He and his family moved into this area and they were only here for about a year but the timing for me was perfect. It was like God had sent him here for that one year just for me. He was going through some trials similar to mine so we could talk about that, and we spent a lot of time just laughing together.

I think we tend to downplay the importance of our need for deep and intimate friendships in the Christian life. Men: most of us aren't real good at this. Too many of us have bought into the Lone Ranger guy thing. And we pay for it dearly. Sometimes I hear people say something like: "If I have God I don't need people. I can just trust God. He's the only friend I need." There may be times in our life when we have to lean hard on God and no one else is available, but that's a rarity. Most of the time we need to also lean on our friends. We all need friends. And not just friends we can give to, but friends we can be vulnerable with; friends we can be weak with. When we're struggling we sometimes think we should just be able to get along with God and work through it, but sometimes being alone is the worst thing to do. Martin Luther once wrote to a despondent friend, "More and graver sins are committed in solitude than in the society of one's fellow man."

## II. Courage (vv.9-26).

When they came to Fair Havens they were faced with a decision. Luke says in v.9 **"the voyage was now dangerous since even the fast was already over."** That's a reference to the Jewish fast on the Day of Atonement, which means that it's early October when sailing on the Mediterranean is very dangerous. Paul knew this and so he advised that they stay and spend the winter in Fair Haven. In v.10 Paul warns them of what will happen if they keep going. **"...and said to them, 'Men, I perceive that the voyage will certainly be with damage and great loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.'"** His warning isn't based on some kind of word from God but simply on common sense and his own experience at sea. We're going to see later that Paul's counsel was partly true but not entirely true. But the captain and the majority of the crew differ with him and convinced the Centurion to keep going. The reason given in v.12 is **"the harbor was not suitable for wintering."** I think they took one look around the dinky little town of Fair Haven and decided it wasn't very fair at all and it was no place to spend a winter. This place was probably named by the Chamber of Commerce to get people to visit, but it wasn't a place a bunch of sailors and soldiers wanted to spend four months! So they prevailed upon the centurion to go to the city of Phoenix, a harbor about 50 miles up the coast of Crete. Phoenix sounds like a better place to spend the winter, doesn't it? But this isn't Arizona. There's an old song called *By the Time I Get to Phoenix*, which says a lot of things can happen before you get to Phoenix, and that's certainly true here on this ship!

So off they go, up the coast of Crete. At first it

seemed they made the right decision. Luke says in v.13, **"When a moderate south wind came up, supposing that they had attained their purpose, they weighed anchor and began sailing along Crete, close inshore."** But that was the calm before the storm because Luke says in vv.14-15, **"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."** This was a hurricane force wind called a "northeaster." It was so strong they couldn't sail against it and get back to the island even though they were close to shore. So they had to let the ship just be driven along by the wind.

The next few verses describe five desperate measures they took to survive. First they ran under the shelter of a little island called Clauda allowing them to get the lifeboat under control and hoist it up (vv.16-17a). Second, they took cables and slid them under the hull of the ship so as to tie it up like a package and hold it together (v.17b). Third, they lowered the sea anchor to act as a brake because they were afraid they'd be driven onto the great sand banks called the Syrtis which lined the coast of north Africa and where the ship could be marooned miles out from shore (v.17c). Fourth, as they were being **"violently storm tossed"** they began to jettison some of the cargo (v.18). Fifth, on the third day they threw even the ship's tackle overboard (v.19).

Finally, after eleven more days of this when they couldn't even see the sun or the stars, which were essential for navigation, Luke says in v.20 that **"all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned."** So now they're thinking, "Man, we should have listened to Paul. He was right. Fair Haven sounds pretty good right now!" And I think Luke, Aristarchus and even Paul are losing hope. I think they wondered as we so often do, "Lord, what are you doing? Lord, you said that you'd get me to Rome and I'm trying to believe it but why does it have to be so difficult? You control the wind and the waves. You stilled the storm for your disciples. Why don't you just do that now?" Think about this in relation to Jonah. Jonah was running from God; he was disobedient to God; unwilling to preach to the Ninevites. And so God sent a storm. I get that! But Paul is being obedient to God. He's on board that ship because he DID preach to people just like the Ninevites. Why then does he get hit with a storm? Do you ever wonder, "God why do you treat your children this way?"

Maybe part of the reason is found in what happens next. When things are at the lowest, Paul speaks up again. I love what he says. He's so human! He starts out and says in v.21b, **"Men, you ought to have followed my advice and not to have set sail from Crete and incurred this damage and loss."** In other words, I told you so! But he's not finished. He goes on and says, **"Yet now I urge you to keep up your courage, for there will 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"** (vv.22-25). The

first time Paul spoke up in v.10 he did so simply based on his common sense as an experienced traveler. Here he speaks up as a prophet of God.

The first word I had you write down was friendship. We need friendship if we're to survive the storm. The second word I want you to write down is courage. That may not sound like a real Christian word. But twice Paul says to them "keep up your courage." And what's different about the courage of a follower of Christ and the courage we see from time to time in just anyone? The difference is that our courage, like Paul's, is built NOT on our own ability but on faith in certain truths about God. Look at what these were for Paul because they're the same for us.

First, Paul knew that he belonged to God. In v.23 he speaks of **"the God to whom I belong."** Do you know that you belong to God not only because he created you but because he redeemed you? "You're not your own," Scripture says, "you were bought with a price." It's like the old story of the boy who made his own little toy boat to float in the river, but one day he lost it in the current and off it went. Months later he was passing by the window of a Goodwill shop where he saw that very same boat he had made for sale. He went inside and he bought it and then he looked at it and said, "Now you're twice mine. First, I made you and then I lost you but now I bought you." God says to you, child of God, "You're twice mine. I made you; then I lost you but now I bought you. You were worth a Son to me." Paul knew that and that gave him courage.

Second, he knew that he was serving God. He says in v.23, **"the God whom I serve."** He remembered that he was doing what he was supposed to be doing and in the midst of serving him he now encounters this seemingly hopeless situation. That gave him courage because he could say, "Listen, as long as I'm serving God I know that whatever comes my way he's ordained and he will see to it that I get to where I'm supposed to be. If you're not serving God you can't have this assurance. Can you say with Paul, "I belong to him; I serve him"?

Finally, he could have courage because he believed God. What did he believe? The angel told him **"God has granted you all those who are sailing with you."** It almost seems Paul had been asking God for that very thing. Then Paul says, **"I believe that it will turn out exactly as I have been told."** That's called faith. Faith isn't positive thinking; it's banking on the revealed promises of God. Faith is a refusal to panic because of who God is and what he's promised in his word. God has promised that he'll never leave or forsake you; that he'll provide for all your needs; that he works all things together for good; that all your sins are forgiven; that the Holy Spirit lives in you; that you have eternal life. Do you believe? That's where courage comes from—believing God.

### III. Wisdom (vv.27-44).

So besides friendship we need courage to survive the storm. But there is one more word I want you to write down—wisdom. Another word for this is common sense. We sometimes think that guys like Paul have their head in the sky. It's nice to have a guy who prays, but usually those aren't the guys you lean on to get your ship to safety. That's

why they didn't listen to him before when he told them to stay in Fair Haven: "Yeah, thank you, pastor, but you just focus on the religious stuff and we'll do the sailing." But as this story proceeds we'll see that Paul kind of takes over the ship. He's already pleaded with them to take courage but now he makes two more pleas.

First, he calls them to stay together. It's now been two weeks since they've been swept from the coast of Crete. But in v.27 Luke says, **"at about midnight the sailors began to surmise that they were approaching some land."** So they took soundings and they figured out they were first 20 and then 15 fathoms deep. This was dangerous because they could easily run aground on a reef. So they dropped four anchors to make sure they would hold for the night and waited for dawn. But then in v.30 Luke says that a few of the sailors tried to escape from the boat. They let down the lifeboat, pretending to lay out more anchors. But Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers in v.31, **"Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved."** This time the centurion listens! Smart guy. Luke says in v.32, **"Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it fall away."**

The second thing Paul pleads for in exercising wisdom is for them all to eat something. Look at v.33. **"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.'" When you're in a state of panic food is not the first thing on your mind. Go to a hospital emergency room and you won't see many people chowing down and suggest, "Hey, why don't we order some take out!" No! They've lost their appetite. They have other things on their mind. And as a result of not eating for two weeks these guys are in a weakened state. Making it to shore will take all the energy they have, so Paul says in v.34, **"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 will perish)." Paul then leads by example. "Having said this, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of all, and he broke it and began to eat. All of them were encouraged and they themselves also took food. All of us in the ship were two hundred and seventy-six persons"** (vv.35-37).**

The interesting thing about all of this is God had promised Paul every life would be spared. Yet Paul could say to the centurion, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you will not be saved." It's like the word of God dangles over the side of the ship with the lifeboat. If Paul had said, "Let them go" or "If you want to starve to death it's fine with me" what would happen to the promise of God? But instead he said, "We have to stay together; take some food...for your preservation." It seems God's promises don't negate man's activity. Our actions are often the means by which God works out his promises. So the fact that God announces what the end result is going to be doesn't mean that we can just sit on our hands and say, "Well, it's all going to work out." God wants us to use wisdom and to act in line with common sense to carry out his purpose.

So you're in a storm. What do you do? Use your head. Work and act and take initiative in ways that are in

keeping with what you know is God's purpose. By the way, did you do your homework from last week? Last week we looked at how Paul told his story to King Agrippa and I gave you an assignment: tell your story to someone this week. How did it go? Maybe you didn't do it. Maybe you just thought if it was supposed to happen; God would make it happen. But it didn't happen because God wants you to be alert and take the initiative. I'm not saying you force it; just be open and willing to act.

For me, it got to be Thursday and I was a little worried I hadn't done my homework. I went out to lunch at my favorite little Chinese place and sat down to read. I had a lot of work to do. But then this young man who runs the restaurant came up to me and started talking. I've talked with him before and we got into this conversation and he told me he just graduated from UC Davis. I asked him what his major was and he said Philosophy. At that point, I began to wonder if God was giving me an opportunity to do my homework. So I asked what philosophical school of thought he liked the most. He said he was a Buddhist. And we began to talk about the philosophical underpinnings of Buddhism. Then I explained the ways the Christian faith was similar and different than Buddhism. Then I knew it was time to do my homework. As I was eating my Szechwan Chicken I told him how the Lord got a hold of me as a 17-year-old boy. I didn't go into great detail, but he listened and I plan on following up with him because the food is good and God may be at work in his life. But here is my point: there was a time in that conversation that I had to put down my book and be willing to take a step. It started with a question. It continued with a story. It ended with an invitation to more conversation in the days ahead.

## CONCLUSION

What's amazing to me about this story of Paul is the impact he had on those around him. We've seen him speak before Jewish scholars and governors and Kings. But now he's with sailors and soldiers and prisoners. Do you know why most of these prisoners were headed to Rome? Because they'd been condemned to death and were going to supply the constant demand which Rome made for human victims to amuse the populace by their death in the arena. But Paul showed these men a God who cared for them and could give a person courage in the face of death.

Maybe that's the answer to our question: why did God allow Paul to go through all of this when he was doing the will of God? How else would these men see the reality of the living and true God who cared for them? And as they watched Paul; as they watched God supply him with friendships and courage and common sense, perhaps they would come to know this God as well. Have you thought about that? How else will your shipmates (neighbors, colleges, relatives) come to know the living and true God who loves them apart from seeing you survive the same storm they're in?