

## **“Anchored in God’s Providence”**

**Acts 27:20-26**

**October 26, 2008**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

Acts 27 tells a great story of a storm at sea that leads to a shipwreck. Just when all seems lost, deliverance comes and all lives are saved. Paul is being transported from Caesarea to Rome, where he is to stand before Caesar for a final decision on his case. Almost three hundred are aboard this ship, which sets off late in the sailing season. The passengers include other prisoners, some of them probably those already condemned to die who are being taken to Rome to supply Rome’s lust for human lives at the gladiator games. Paul, who had a great deal of experience with sea travel, advises the captain and Roman soldiers against setting out on the final leg of the journey to Rome. But they are fooled by favorable winds and set out anyway. The winds soon change, and a great storm blows in that causes no end of trouble. For the next fourteen days, conditions deteriorate until all hope is lost. The ship runs aground in the surf off the island of Malta, but all are delivered safely ashore and eventually to their destination of Rome.

It is a fascinating story that is well-told. But why is it here? Did Luke include it just because it is so interesting, or does it also have relevance to his purpose? As we conclude our study of the book of Acts today, let’s remember the purpose we started with over six months ago when we began this study. Luke’s purpose is to describe to us the continuing words and deeds of Jesus by his Spirit and through his apostles. God is a missionary God, and he has brought his church a long way since Acts 1. The church began in Jerusalem, and now makes it to the most powerful city of its day, the city of Rome. How has it come so far, and how will it continue to expand at the close of Acts? Acts 27 answers that question. In the providence of God, it will continue to advance through storm. That could accurately serve as the title of the book of Acts as well as the entire history of the church.

The history of our own congregation could also be accurately described as an advance through storm. During the first fifty years of this church’s existence, it was tiny and struggling. Then there was a bitter church split in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. More struggles ensued in the first half of the past century. I understand from my predecessor here, Johnny Long, that the erection of this building in 1983 was accompanied by much fighting and led to many people leaving this church. But God has continued to advance his kingdom here. We believe that he will continue to do so through us and through our church planting efforts within our city. But Luke wants us to know that it will be an advance through storm.

The way to make it through a storm is to believe in the providence of God. Though Luke doesn't use that word here, this chapter is filled with the idea of God's providence. What we mean by the providence of God is that he is in charge of all things, leaving no place for chance. The Heidelberg Catechism says it well. "All creatures are so in his hand that without his will they can not so much as move." Note two lessons we learn here about God's providence.

## **I. The Certainty of Reaching Our Destination**

Luke has already let us in on a little secret, so that we know Paul will in fact make it to Rome. He told us back in 23:11 of an appearance Jesus made to Paul, bringing a promise with him. **"Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome."** Three years and many close calls would occur before Paul's arrival in Rome.

There were many times when it looked like he wouldn't make it at all. There was the time when he was seized in the temple and the mob attempted to beat him to death, an attempt thwarted by the arrival of Roman soldiers coming to his rescue. Then we read of forty men who made an oath not to eat or drink until they killed Paul. Then he languished in prison for over two years while awaiting a decision from the Roman governors concerning his case. The governors didn't care a thing for Paul or for justice. They mostly wanted to please the Jews, who wanted Paul dead. But God delivered him. Now he is a prisoner on board a ship that is battered into oblivion by a storm. He survives the storm to encounter a new threat. The soldiers in charge of the prisoners wanted to kill them all in order to prevent their escape upon leaving the sinking ship. The soldiers' desire was due to the practice current at that time to visit upon a guard the punishment due any prisoner who escaped while being under that soldier's guard. Since most of these prisoners had already been condemned to die, they were strongly motivated to kill them all. God had to change the hearts of hardened soldiers who were naturally more motivated to save themselves than others. And then there was the venomous snakebite Paul received on the island of Malta after the shipwreck.

The obstacles Paul faced were more than human. This whole account of the storm at sea suggests a supernatural enemy, Satan himself. Throughout the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, the sea symbolizes evil powers that stand in opposition to God and his purposes. So in Revelation 13:1, the beast with the blasphemous names on its seven heads arises out of the sea. And Revelation 21:1 says that in the new heavens and the new earth, the sea will no longer exist. So Luke means us to understand here that Paul was suffering under enemies far more powerful than himself, the demonic and Satanic forces of evil. Satan has always rallied his troops to oppose God's saving purposes, particularly the Messiah God promised to send as a seed of the woman. He worked through Cain to slay his godly brother, Abel. Through Pharaoh he

attempted to wipe out all the male children of Israel. Then God declared that the Messiah would arise from the line of King David, resulting in evil men slaying all the male children and potential heirs of the various descendents of David. We see it in Herod's attempts to kill Jesus as a baby, leading him to slay the babies in Bethlehem. Would Satan give up now that Jesus had been raised from the dead and ascended into heaven, far beyond his jurisdiction? He does not give up, but turns his efforts against those who follow Christ and proclaim his name. By the providence of God, though, Paul reaches the destination Jesus had promised him. He makes it to Rome, in spite of strong human and demonic opposition. All things are under his control, so "that no creature shall separate us from his love, since all creatures are so in his hand that without his will they can not so much as move."

Does this have application to us? In order to answer that question, we must ask another. Has God promised anything to us regarding our destination? Glory has been promised us, and the two chief components of that glory are to be with Jesus and to be like Jesus. Here's how John expresses that. **"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is"** (1 John 3:2). You will be like Jesus one day, and it is so certain that you will arrive at this place that God says you are **"predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son"** (Ro. 8:29). Jesus loves perfectly, and one day you will too. Jesus is filled with joy, and one day you will be as well. Jesus' instinct is to obey fully, and one day we will have that same instinct. We don't have it now. I saw recently an old BC comic strip that featured a worm climbing the mountain to get a word from God at the top of the mountain. God's word to him is simple: "Go and sin no more." As the worm crawls back down the mountain, the last frame shows us his thoughts: "Darn, right at the peak of the apple season." It is his nature to eat apples, and God's command introduces within him the conflict between his nature and those commands. Won't it be wonderful when that conflict is over and our greatest desires and joys will be exactly what God commands us? That is our destination, and God promises it, just as he promised that Paul would reach Rome.

So what is the application? We are to be filled with hope even at the peak of the storm when things look the worst. We will reach our destination of being with Jesus and being like Jesus. God will do it, and no force of hell can prevent it. So be filled with hope. Notice verse 20. **"When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned."** When all had lost hope, Paul, armed with Jesus' promise, was filled with hope. So he said to them all, **"So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told"** (v. 25). What does hope look like amidst the storms of our lives? I know there are storms in the lives of many of you right now. There are stormy marriages, stormy jobs, stormy economic needs that are often due to not having a job, stormy relationships between parents and children, or stormy

relationships with others. What does hope look like in the midst of those storms? Let me point out that one result of hope in Paul's life is that he took action. He used his persuasive powers to keep everyone on board the ship until it was time to leave. He urged them to eat food before leaving the ship. He said grace before they ate the food. His hope led him away from passivity. I have been thinking some lately about the connection between laziness and the loss of hope. Until recently, I thought laziness was nothing more than a lack of self-control. There is an element of that within laziness, but a more fundamental feature of laziness is the loss of hope. When we lose hope, we lose motivation and just sink to the level of wanting things to be as comfortable and easy as possible. In other words, we want to escape, like the sailors who **"were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship's boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow"** (v. 30). So if you lose hope in your marriage, you will become lazy and try to escape into another relationship or into something else that you hope will bring satisfaction. If you lose hope in God using you in your job, you will become lazy. Sometimes we mask our laziness with busyness, and there is plenty of opportunity for that. There is the busyness of answering e-mails and text messages all day long, of always wanting to be plugged in. But it is laziness because it keeps us from doing the right things. A marriage that has lost hope results in very little effort being put forth toward that marriage. Many Christians in our day have lost hope and become pessimistic about the progress of the gospel through the storms of secularism, materialism and pluralism. The result is a loss of effort in this area. Perhaps you need to repent of a loss of hope and review again the doctrine of God's providence, the basis of our hope.

## **II. The Uncertainty of the Path**

There is a second aspect of this doctrine of God's providence. While it is certain that we will reach the destination God has promised to us, the path God will choose for that destination cannot be known to us until after it happens. Paul certainly could not have predicted his path to Rome. He did not know that it would involve as much suffering as it did, including two years in jail and this very difficult experience of the shipwreck, 14 days without food, a threat from the soldiers to kill him, and a snakebite that would normally be fatal. But because of that path, God expanded Paul's witness. He was able to stand before King Agrippa, as we saw last week. And now we read in this chapter the words of the angel to Paul. **"You must stand before Caesar"** (v. 24). Moreover, because of this particular path God chose, there were many on the ship who heard of Jesus, as well as those on the island of Malta. And when he reached Rome, he was able to proclaim Jesus **"with all boldness and without hindrance"** (28:31) for two years while under house arrest.

The problem, of course, is that Paul could not know these things until after they happened. All he knew is that things seemed to be going from bad to

worse. We tend to view Paul's experience here from the big picture perspective of seeing the whole thing like we would read a novel or watch a movie. But Paul did not live it that way. So let's take a snapshot of his life after he abandons ship and finds himself clinging to a piece of the ship as he bobs up and down on the waves. I would imagine that none of his youthful dreams about the future ever included such a vision of his future life. But here he was anyway, after a series of unexpected setbacks in his life. It didn't seem like things could get any worse than they were at this point in his life. Perhaps you are just in such a place in your life right now, bobbing up and down in the ocean and wondering how in the world you got to this place.

What practical difference does the providence of God make when you're in the sea with nothing? It doesn't take away the suffering. Paul was just as cold as everyone else. When they went without food for 14 days, he was just as hungry and weak as everyone else. The providence of God doesn't remove the suffering, but it does give us contentment and meaning in the present. In other words, the providence of God helps us live in the present and avoid the "grass is greener" myth. Years ago, I heard about a painting that featured four cows standing at the intersection of four different fields. Each cow had his head in the field of another, convinced that the grass was greener elsewhere. Our need is to come to the place of acceptance right now in whatever the providence of God has brought into your life. That doesn't mean that you can't try to change those things by which suffering comes into your life. There is something unnatural about accepting suffering with no attempt to change it. But when all attempts fall short, we take refuge in knowing that these things, even the bad ones, come from the all powerful hand of our Father in heaven.

Someone has said that the providence of God is like reading Hebrew in that it must be read backwards if we are to make any sense of it. Though it often doesn't make sense in the moment, when the fuller picture is seen, we will say to God about the storms of our lives, "God, it was a very hard time but also a very good time. Your wisdom and grace were written all over that time in my life and I praise you for it."

## **CONCLUSION:**

As we prepare for communion, let us confess to God our sin of not trusting in his providence. Perhaps our unbelief and the resulting loss of hope have resulted in laziness in our lives. It works the other direction as well, by the way. If you spot laziness in your life, it is very likely that there is a loss of hope lurking in your heart. And let us confess any lack of contentment in our lives. The Lord's Supper teaches us that our future is a bright one, portrayed in our place at the heavenly feast, the Wedding Supper of the Lamb. We have that place because of the grace of God in sending Jesus to us.