

The Storm at Sea

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Preacher: Rev Andrew Coghill

[0 : 0 0] Let us pray. We will remain seated to pray. Gracious and most loving Father, help us now as we seek thee together in thy word, that thou would speak unto us through it.

That we would hear thee, O Lord, through word and spirit together. That thou would grant a blessing upon all that we contemplate this day. The blessing may indeed be ours, and the glory be thine.

The truth of thy word may shine forth, and that thou, O Lord, would speak unto our hearts, and feed thou our souls this day. For this is the bread of life. This is the living word of the living God.

So bless it to us now, we beseech thee, and help us. In Jesus' name. Amen. Acts chapter 27, we read at the 25th verse, in the authorized version, Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer, for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me.

Every verse, every text, has a context. And the context of this verse is an ongoing, seemingly interminable storm, in the midst of which Paul and his companions are in fear and jeopardy of their lives.

[1 : 1 9] This was a storm that passengers and crew alike had hoped to avoid, but they still set sail. They set out from their comparatively safe harbor, at the fair havens there, knowing that this kind of thing could happen at this time of the year.

We read that verse 9, Now when much time was spent, and was sailing, was now dangerous, because the fast was now already passed. Paul admonished them. The fast in question being the Day of Atonement, which corresponds approximately to the end of September, beginning of October, and it was reckoned by many that navigation became unsafe after that stage in the year when winter was drawing on.

And this is the stage they were at. So they knew it was a risk, but they still decided to set sail. We read that much time was spent. Now we don't know for sure whether that was unforeseen delays, or whether it was opportunities lost, days frittered away here and there since they left Caesarea, at the beginning of chapter 27, en route to Rome.

We don't know what was the cause of those delays. Some of them may have been avoidable, some of them may not have been. But either way, time had been lost. It might have been better spent.

Time without the loss of which they might even by then have been already safely to their desired haven. In this case, the coast of Italy. But I'm sure the spiritual parallel is not lost on us either, of missed opportunities, of time that we let slip through our fingers that we could have improved upon, when we could have made the most or more of our opportunities, and now instead find ourselves without the safe haven, without the shelter we need in the midst of a storm, not of our making perhaps, but which might have been avoided.

[3 : 1 9] And our souls now are in very jeopardy because of time that has passed away. And we're in the midst of deadly storms. But they had been safe enough where they were.

Wasn't perhaps ideal. Wasn't as good or luxurious or commodious as they wanted, but it was good and safe. But they wanted better. They wanted a better harbour.

They wanted a bigger, more spacious place. They had what was good, but they wanted something better. And always in life, that which is just that wee bit better, that which will be just that wee bit more comfortable, that by which we are always inclined to be tempted, is always just out of reach.

Just a wee bit further along the coast. Just a wee bit round the corner. Just over the next hill. Always just out of reach. Just the next thing that we aim for.

This is part of the deceitfulness, of course, of sin. That it never actually satisfies. It's always just the next thing. Always the next hope. It wasn't so very far away, Phoenix or Venice, that they were aiming for.

[4 : 27] Perhaps 30 miles or so along the coast. And the fair havens almost within reach. Chantilisingly close. But now here they are, and all hope seems to be lost.

The ship is in peril. Almost certainly the meaning of verse 16 says we had much work to come by the boat when they're running under the island, Cloude, which is about 23 miles to the leeward of Crete.

It's size-wise, it's just slightly smaller than Barra. And under the shelter of it, of the landmass there, no doubt the waves were less stormy than they would have been out in the open sea.

In the shelter of that landmass, they were able to finally haul the boat aboard. This is the wee rowing boat they would tow behind them. Why so much difficulty? The implication is it was swamped.

The boat was already full of water. Now if a boat's full of water, you're in an awful lot more trouble and hassle to pull it up and haul it on board and empty it out and then make it secure.

[5 : 30] So they're taking in water. The boat is, the ship is. Because that's almost certainly the implication also of what we have at verses 18 and 19. Being exceedingly tossed with tempest, the next day they lightened the ship.

And the third day we cast out with our own hands the tackling of the ship. Now, making a ship lighter in the midst of a storm doesn't necessarily make it more stable or more safe.

Except in one condition, where it's better to have a lighter ship than a heavier one. And that is if the ship is leaking. And that is probably the implication of what's happening here.

The ship is leaking. That was a problem with ancient styles of shipping compared to more modern ones that developed in later centuries. You know, by the time you get to the 18th or 19th centuries, if a ship is in the midst of a storm and it's hugging the coast as they were here, the safe thing for the captain to do is to put out further to sea.

Because what he is desperate to avoid is foundering on the rocks or on the coast. So he'll go out to sea and weather the storm out there. But that's because he's got a pretty watertight ship.

[6 : 44] A far better, more ably built ship in these later centuries than these ancient kinds of shipping would be. They habitually took in water. They were a lot less safe than the later ones.

And that's the implication here. You have to lighten this ship so it doesn't sit so heavy in the water because it's taking in water already. Might be putting it too strong to say it's sinking, but it's certainly leaking.

Again, verse 20 implies that they have virtually given up all hope of being saved because such a leaking ship has to get to land.

It's the exact opposite of these later ships who go out to sea to weather the storm. They've got to get to land or they're lost. If they stay out at sea, they're just going to take in more and more and more water.

When neither sun nor stars in many days appeared and no small tempest lay on us, all hope that we should be saved was then taken away.

[7 : 44] Finding land was a matter of life and death because simply to continue at sea was certain death. This is where we find ourselves.

Is it not? The storm is not of our own making. We don't mean to be caught up in it. In one sense, it's not our fault the world is fallen.

It's not our fault we inherit original sin from our first parents. It's not our fault it's in the state it's in. It's not our fault that so much goes wrong in our lives, but it does.

And this is where we are. We don't want to be in it. We don't want things to be in that condition. But this storm is our life. Our fatally leaking, spiritually helpless life.

The depths of which, without divine intervention, we simply perish in the midst of. This indeed has become the expectation of everybody on Paul's ship.

[8 : 44] All hope that we should be saved was then taken away. Perhaps this was even the expectation of Paul himself. Although it shouldn't have been, at least in Paul's case, because apart from Damascus Road itself, the Lord had given Paul specific appearances or visions or speakings to him on messages on at least three previous occasions.

You know, in Acts chapter 16, at verse 9, remember that he's got that vision of the man of Macedonia saying, come over to Macedonia and help us. And in Corinth, when things are going badly, in chapter 18, at verse 9, then spake the Lord to Paul in a night by a vision.

Be not afraid, but speak and hold not thy peace. For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee, for I have much people in this city. And then most recently, in chapter 23 of Acts, at verse 11, we read, So Paul at least should have had the assurance that he at least would survive the storm, that he would get through it.

He had been specifically assured that he would get to Rome. He would testify before Caesar. But then, it is neither uncommon, nor is it unbiblical, for saints of the Lord, even saints of the Lord, to need a wee bit of reassurance at times.

Think of John the Baptist, a greater saint in the Old Testament tradition you couldn't find, although he's in the New Testament, of whom our Lord said, among them that are born of women, there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist.

[10 : 28] And he seems to be full of faith and knowledge of his ministry. Think in John chapter 1 of how he says, The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him and saith, Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.

This is he of whom I said, After me, cometh a man which is preferred before me, for he was before me. And I knew him not, but that he should be made manifest through Israel.

Therefore am I come baptizing with water. And John bare records, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him, and I knew him not.

But he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending and remaining on him, the same as he which baptizeth the Holy Ghost.

And I saw and bare record that this is the Son of God. Couldn't get more sure than that. You couldn't get more definite. And yet, Matthew chapter 11, verses 2 and 3, we read, When John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?

[11 : 36] Now, John, for all his assurance before, now, he needs a bit of reassurance. He needs a bit of telling again. He was certain, but now, he's got a certain amount of doubts.

How does Jesus answer John's disciples there? Jesus simply tells him, Go back and tell John what you see. The lepers are cleansed, the blind receive their sight, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them, and blessed is he who's not offended in me.

In other words, Jesus gives them the facts. And they must now apply the faith. That is what Christ does for us time and time again.

He presents us the facts, and he requires of us the faith. Faith, faith which we have not of ourselves. Of course, it is the gift of God, but he expects us to apply it.

He expects us to apply it to the facts. Even John the Baptist, and perhaps even Paul here, need a bit of reassurance at times. So, if we find ourselves needing a wee bit of reassurance from the Lord, it's not unbiblical.

[12 : 43] It's not unchristian. It's not uncommon. They all need a wee bit of reassurance. And God, so far from being unwilling to give it, or to chide his people for lack of faith, supplies that reassurance willingly.

Because the fact of the matter is that God is glorified. And firstly, the leaving of his intervention to the last necessary minute, Paul says that God's, the angel of God stood beside him and said, you know, you'll not only be saved and go to Rome, but everybody in your ship will be saved too.

He says, I believe God. I believe that this is true. God gives the reassurance. God is glorified in giving his reassurance at the last necessary minute. I don't say the last possible minute.

It could have been left even later. But the last necessary minute in God's sight, you know, think for example of, of Peter when he's in prison, when Herod wanted to execute him.

And we read in Acts 12 verses six and seven, when Herod would have brought him forth the same night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers bound with two chains and the keepers before the door kept the prison and behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him.

[13 : 55] A light shine in the prison. He smote Peter on the side, raised him up saying, arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands. The same night, the implication there in Acts 12 is, Peter was going to be executed the next day.

Now God could have come with his angel any number of nights that Peter was in prison. He could have come the previous night, could have come the two nights before, could have come several nights before, but he left it till the last night.

God is glorified and scooping us out of our troubles at the last necessary minutes. One reason I would suggest to you for that is in order to demonstrate that what happens thereafter is not, cannot have been by mere accident or coincidence.

Because all human hope is gone. All human hope has perished. So when God intervenes, we see and acknowledge it had to be God. Secondly, God is glorified by doing above and beyond all that we could ask or think.

Paul might have been reassured, well, okay, I should have had faith. God told me I would go to Rome and testify, so I'm going to survive this storm, but don't know about everybody else.

[15 : 14] But God says to him, look, not only you, but in this leaky little battered ship that's been blasted about in the Mediterranean for a fortnight solid without moon or stars or anything to navigate by, 276 people, not one is going to be lost.

Not a single man overboard, not a single drowning, not a single fatality, not one. God is glorified in doing above and beyond what could possibly be the ordinary human outcome.

Paul's faith consequently is boosted and he is enabled to say, wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer, for I believe God that it shall be even as it was told me.

With this 276 people, not one perishes, that can only be a miracle. So into this seemingly hopeless situation then, when they are giving up hope of ever being saved, God speaks.

Friend, if your situation seems hopeless this morning, and I don't know what your situation is, but if it seems hopeless this morning, it may or may not have yet fallen as low as it's going to.

[16 : 36] I don't know if you've got further to fall. I don't know if things are going to get worse before they get better in your situation. But what I can assure you is that God will catch you before you fall, utterly, if you're trusting in him, if you put your faith in him.

Remember that it's written in the word of God, Deuteronomy 33, verse 27, the eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms. He is always beneath you in that sense.

Despite being so high and holy and great, he is always beneath you in that sense, ready to gather you in his arms. You cannot go lower down than he is. Remember what Psalm 139 says, If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there, fair enough.

If I make my bed in hell, the place of the dead, behold, thou art there. Remember it is said of our Lord in the Apostles' Creed, he descended into hell.

You may feel like you're going through hell at the moment. It doesn't matter how low down you go, God is lower down beneath you, ready to catch you, ready to bear you up.

[17 : 44] You will never fall so far nor sink so deep. But that he will be there already, and when all hope seems lost, all hope that we should be saved was then taken away, verse 20, what we read here.

That is when God speaks and begins to act. And as it is here in this passage, the promise will precede the fulfillment, perhaps by some considerable time, because we don't know how long it is after Paul speaks to them that they actually do run aground on Malta.

We don't know how much time elapses. We know that it's approximately a fortnight after being storm-battered, but they do end up in Malta, but we don't know how long it is before that that Paul speaks to them.

So there could be some considerable time. Paul says, cheer up, I believe God. They say, okay, fair enough. And days go by, and days go by, and it's still storm, and it's still dark, and there's no prospect yet of being saved.

The promise will precede the fulfillment. God will give you his promise before he actually brings it to pass. And one reason for doing that is in order to try your faith, to test and see whether you do actually walk by faith, not by sight.

[18 : 59] Because the trying of your faith, Peter tells us, is precious. 1 Peter 1, verse 7, that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold, that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise, and honor, and glory, at the appearing of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen, ye love, in whom though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice, with joy unspeakable, and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls.

The trial of your faith is precious. That is why, when God promises, it won't instantly be the next minute, it will be some time, by which you have to walk by that faith, by which you have to trust in what he has said, the trial of your faith, being exceedingly precious, more than fine gold.

So here is the test in the midst of your storm, as it was in theirs. God speaks through a man, and this is his Paul, who tells what he has experienced. He cites the authority of the living God.

You, he says, should be of good cheer, for I believe God. Now, with the possible exception of Luke, the writer of Acts, who is very probably in the ship with Paul, there is nothing to suggest that anyone on the ship, apart from them, is anything other than a pagan.

Nothing to suggest that anyone else on the ship, believes in the true God, but the subsequent narrative suggests, that enough of them believe, that Paul believes. They may not believe in Jehovah, the great God of Israel, but they believe that Paul believes, from which they themselves take courage.

[20 : 45] And we've seen this many times, haven't we? We've been in situations where, we're at a loss, we don't know what to do, but there's some colleague, or some friend, who's perfectly calm, and he says, that's all right, I know what to do here, I've got it under control, maybe a bit of a storm, maybe a bit of a, it's okay, we do this, this and this, I'll handle it, leave it with me.

And because they are calm and confident, and they know what they're doing, we take courage. How much more afraid we would be, if they said, oh, I don't know what to do either, I'm at loss, I don't have a clue, no, because they are in charge, of what they know, and think, and feel, and believe, they are calm about it, they know what to do, we take courage from it, though we don't know what to do.

But they do, so we take courage from that. That's the situation with these pagans here. They don't necessarily believe in the God of Israel, in the Lord Jesus Christ, but they believe that Paul believes, and for now they take courage from that.

We've seen it many times in our lives. If they believe with such unshakable confidence, these others we encounter, then perhaps we too may be a little less afraid.

And in this ship in which Paul is traveling, the pagans are reassured, that this Christian at least, trusts his God, whose word as we see, proves to be infallibly true.

[22 : 04] This then, friends, this is the missionary imperative, for each one of us, that we believe in our God, in such a way, and with such a confidence, that others see it, and take confidence from it, because of what they see in us.

The numbers who can go, or be sent as missionaries to foreign countries, may be few. But in the deep irony of providence, our own society, is now probably more heathen, than any to which missionaries are sent abroad.

God, we ourselves must be as missionaries, in our own culture and society. But for that, we must be able to shine out, our faith in every storm, to every onlooker, in every situation.

Can we say, by way of our life, our speech, our conversation, our courage, and encouragement, in the very midst, of this life-threatening, and soul-destroying storm, in which the stars are no help to us, despite the fact that, so many people seem to supposedly, put their trust in them.

There's no outward visible sign, or guidance. No man has seen God at any time. No outward sign. And so knowing that, even if we do trust, and obey, things here, may not necessarily change right away.

[23 : 32] The trial of our faith, is necessary. May not change any time soon. Can we still say, not only that we walk by faith, not by sight, but that we have the courage, to cheer others also, to encourage them, to put their faith and trust, in our God, and our Savior, because we believe, that it shall be even, as He has told us.

We believe God, that it shall be even, as He has told us. For this we must do, if we would live out, the mission of the gospel, and fulfill the missionary imperative, of every believer.

That is what we are called to do. Jesus says to His disciples, John 15 at verse 16, Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go, and bring forth fruit.

What does He mean by that fruit? He means not only, a transformation of their lives, by His Spirit, but also of bringing in, of others, the bearing of fruit, that ye should go, and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit, should remain, that whatsoever ye shall ask, of the Father in my name, He may give it to you.

Friend, nobody doubts, the reality, of the darkness, nor the duration, and the violence, of the storm, you are going through, nor the inadequacy, of our own leaky ship.

[24 : 58] But if one of Jesus' disciples, could walk on the waves, surely we can sail in them. A poet has put it thus, Be gone on belief, my Saviour is near, and for my relief, will surely appear.

By prayer let me wrestle, and He will perform, with Christ in the vessel, I smile at the storm. Though dark be my way, since He is my guide, His mind to obey, it is His to provide.

Though cisterns be broken, and creatures all fail, the word He hath spoken, will surely prevail. Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer, for I believe God, that it shall be, even as it was told me.

If we can begin to believe, that God's intervening grace, has been true for others, we may not be sure of ourselves, but there's others, we can point to say, yes, I know that he's a Christian, I know that she's a Christian, you can see it in their lives, you can see it in their hearts, if we can believe, that it has been true for others, and them just being ordinary folk, just like us, then we in turn, may be the more encouraged, to ask, and seek, and knock, that we too, may receive this grace, ourselves, and so, may we be in turn, a means of encouragement, and strengthening, for others again, bearing of fruit, passing on, the light of the gospel, the good news, of his grace, yea, under God, be an instrument, to the saving of souls, who as yet, have no faith, of their own, they cannot see God, but they can see us, and we, can see, the fruitfulness, of what the Lord does, in others, they can see us, they can see that we believe, that they can hope, that God is love, faith, hope, and love, all working together, even for them, and that he, the Lord, has a desire to save, and to save to the uttermost, all that come to him, by faith, this,

I know, to be true, for I, believe, God, that it shall be, even as it was told me, even as it has been told Paul, even as it has been told, all the apostles, even as it has been told, in God's infallible word, every believer, who has put their trust, in faith, in Christ, this is our, encouragement, this is our strength, in the midst of the storm, though we see no change, as yet, wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer, for I, believe, God, that it shall be, even as it was told me, let us pray, we stand to pray, gracious, and almighty God, be in the midst, of the storms, of our life, this day, and help us, for we believe, in thee, O God, we hear, we hear the cries, of the cynics, and the pundits, who so confidently, predict, the demise, of the church, of Jesus Christ, within a generation, but they have been doing that, for 30 years, they've been doing that, for 50 years, they've been doing that, for a hundred years, and they are wrong, each time, for they believe, not thee, but we believe,

[28 : 34] God, that it shall be, even as it was told, unto us, even as thine, infallible word, doth declare, wherefore, let us not only, be of good cheer, ourselves, but let us be a means, of cheering, and encouraging others, that though they may, as yet not have, the gift, or grace of faith, they may see it alive, and at work in us, and so may be encouraged, that though they may, not yet have it, for themselves, yet they can see, and know it to be real, for we believe, God, that it shall be, even as it was told, unto us, so Lord, in the midst, of the storm, of our life, do thou come amongst us, and encourage us, do thou give us strength, O Lord, and ability to endure, through thy great grace, and mercy, do thou bless thy word, and spirit unto us now, and hear our prayers, and forgive our sin, for Jesus' sake, Amen.

Amen.