

## Acts 27:22

### **I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost**

One of the great challenges to the Christian faith is why God allows disasters to happen

- People in the United States must be wondering that as they look at New Orleans
- And as they remember the events of 11 September 2001
- While Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster
- The attack on the twin towers, the Pentagon and on the airliners a terrorist atrocity
- A website prepared as a tribute to those who died on 11 September
- Proudly proclaimed to the terrorists:
- ‘You thought you would bring us to our knees. You didn’t.’
- Maybe a Christian would have to make a different response

As we come towards the end of Acts

- It is surprising to find so much space devoted to Paul’s journey to Rome
- The description reads more like a novel than most of the New Testament
- It is one of the most vivid, descriptive pieces of writing in the whole Bible
- Acts 27:1 gives us an important clue (‘we would sail for Italy’)
- Reminding us that Luke himself provides an eyewitness account
- That was more than likely based on a journal kept during the voyage
- Though some have doubted the authenticity of the story
- James Smith, an experienced yachtsman and classical scholar comments:

No sailor would have written in a style so little like that of a sailor;  
no man not a sailor could have written a narrative of a sea voyage  
so consistent in all its parts, unless from actual observation.

Nevertheless, Luke is generally more interested in theological observation

- Than such a long dramatic account of a sea voyage, however perilous
- Why does Luke include this lengthy chapter?
- It seems to me that the passage shows God’s sovereignty is ultimately at work
- Even in all the trials and tribulations of life
- In the most difficult situations, the hand of God is still at work
- Through the forces of nature and folly of humans, God is still at work
- Does this mean that God directly wills that calamitous things happen in the world?
- It is hard to say
- Does it mean that God can bring love, grace and hope out of the worst suffering
- It must do – for that is the transforming power of the cross
- When we recognise that God is intimately aware of human sufferings
- For Jesus is aptly described as, ‘a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief’ (Isa. 53)

The mysterious providence of God is unfathomable

- Christ can still every storm – yet he manifestly does not still every storm
- Christ can heal every sick person – yet he manifestly does not do so
- Sometimes he miraculously delivers Christians from disasters and suffering
- At other times he gives courage to endure disasters and suffering
- He is Saviour in eternity but that does not mean he insulates Christians from problems

At Caesarea, Paul, Luke and Aristarchus boarded a small coastal vessel

- About 70 miles north of Caesarea at the ancient Phoenician port of Sidon
- They took on more cargo and Paul was permitted to visit the Christians of the city
- Paul was a Roman citizen and retained some rights until proven guilty
- There is also a possibility that Festus had advised Julius what to do
- From there they headed northwest toward Cyprus
- At Myra, they boarded a larger Alexandrian grain ship for the longer voyage to Italy

It was really too late in the autumn (after the Feast of Yom Kippur, late Sept. early Oct.)

- To make such a journey and Paul, an experienced traveller, warned them
- But the pilot and ship's owner wanted to get as far as Phoenix for the winter
- At first things went quite well but then a storm blew up
- And without the stars by which they could navigate they thought they were all lost

The long sailing narrative in Acts 27 reminds us that Christians undergo:

## I TESTING

In one place Paul says that he goes through testing to keep him from conceit

- And to rest in the sufficiency of God

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Many people have speculated what Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' might have been

- Suggestions include incessant temptation, dogged opponents, eye problems
- Malaria, migraine headaches, epilepsy, speech impediment
- No one knows what it was but Paul's conclusion is clear
- God's grace is sufficient in the midst of life's storms

It is very easy to say that a Christian is experiencing trouble as a mark of God's judgment

- But although there are occasions when someone's suffering comes
- As an obvious and direct result of their actions
- There are times when there is no obvious explanation of why something happened
- The Old Testament tells us that:

In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.

(Job 1:1)

The book considers the perennial question, 'Why do the righteous suffer?'

- Despite being a good, God-fearing man, blameless and upright
- Job loses his family, his wealth and his health
- His three friends, sometimes called 'Job's comforters'
- Discuss the overwhelming tragedies – insisting that his suffering is a punishment
- Through everything, Job is devoted to God and contends his life is not full of sin
- A fourth friend, Elihu, tell Job to humble himself and use the testing to purify his life
- When Job has the opportunity to question God, he learns his need to trust in the Lord

The Psalm writer learned the same lesson (Psalm 73), for he writes:

I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills. Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression. Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth ... This is what the wicked are like - always carefree, they increase in wealth. Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence ... When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny ... Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.

We too must grapple until we see things in the way that God sees them

- Sometimes testing comes to keep us from conceit
- Sometimes testing comes to purify our lives
- Sometimes testing comes to strengthen our trust in God

## II TRUSTING

When things were just about as bad as they could be for Paul and his fellow travellers

- An angel appeared to Paul promising that the lives of all on board would be saved
- Paul urged them to keep up their courage, for not one would be lost

Living life in a storm is not where anyone would choose to be

- But when the storms of life come we need to know in whom we are going to trust
- Storms can be forecasted or they can blow up from nowhere
- But one thing is for certain – you know when you are in one

Paul and his fellow travellers had been in the storm for fourteen days

- It was then that the angel of God stood by Paul and reassured him
- Although I am not ruling out the possibility of an angelic appearance
- I think the most likely way of God comforting us is through his Word

Paul's word from the Lord was that they would run aground on an island

- Soon they realised that they were in shallower water
- They still had to guard against being wrecked against the rocks
- And Paul also had to thwart the attempt of some who were trying to get away
- Instead, when the lifeboat had been cut adrift to prevent their escape
- Paul encouraged them all to eat

Paul's approach to trusting the Lord was both spiritual and practical

- He shared with them the word that God had given him
- And also gave leadership in time of crisis
- Regarding those who were trying to get away
- And the importance of eating
- When for many days to eat properly would have been impossible

When the ship was eventually beached on a sand-bar at Malta

- The Roman soldiers would have killed all the prisoners
- Not least because Roman military law decreed that a guard who allowed an escape
- Would be subject to the same penalty as an escaped prisoner would have suffered
- But again, Paul was saved because of the actions of the centurion
- God in his providence brought them all safely to shore as he promised Paul he would

It is an encouragement to us all to keep trusting

- In recent years we have, quite rightly, renewed our emphasis on the power of God
- A God of wonders, a God of miracles, a God of healing and of mighty acts
- But that must not lead us to the conclusion that if God is not acting as we would
- That he is not in the situation at all

Christians of a previous generation, including the American poet, John Greenleaf Whittier

- Remind us of the importance of trusting God in every situation, Whittier writes:

Here in the maddening maze of things,  
When tossed by storm and flood;  
To one fixed ground my spirit clings  
I know that God is good.

Or John Wesley, who himself experiences a terrible storm at sea

- Translating from the German of the Moravian Christian, Johan Rothe, wrote

Though waves and storms go o'er my head,  
Though strength, and health, and friends be gone,  
Though joys be withered all and dead,  
Though every comfort be withdrawn,  
On this my steadfast soul relies -  
Father, thy mercy never dies!

The critic can say to a Christian for whom everything is going well

- It's all right for you, everything is fine for you – but what about when it's not
- Which gives the Christian who is being known testing and trusting, the chance of

### III TESTIFYING

We do not know whether the when Paul said the ship would run into trouble

- He was speaking through direct guidance or human wisdom
- We know that on one point he was not accurate
- For he predicted loss of life as they ventured out and that did not happen
- Perhaps, then, we are safer to conclude that it was simply human wisdom
- That Paul had gained as a seasoned traveller
- Who had been shipwrecked three times
- And had on one occasion spent a night and a day in the open sea (2 Cor. 11:25)
- Nevertheless, Paul was overruled by the majority
- Which decided to try to make another 40 miles progress to a better harbour

Later, Paul sensed that the sailors were trying to abandon the ship

- And his advice enabled those in charge to keep them on board
- So that more hands would be available to help when they were most needed
- Paul also gave wise advice when he told those on board to eat
- Again we have no reason to think that this was anything other than common sense
- It is a reminder that though Christians are called upon to testify to the word of God
- That common sense and human experience are useful tools

The common stereotype might suggest Christians to be heavenly minded but no earthly use

- But in scripture this is far from the case
- Paul did not fit this stereotype and neither did Joseph, Moses, Joshua
- David, Solomon, Daniel, Nehemiah and a host of others
- Gaining experience through alert observation, wide conversation, good reading
- A knowledge of the world in which we live and the people who live in it
- Is all useful to us in shaping our Christian testimony and witness
- After all unbelievers will find it hard to conclude Christian testifying is true
- If believers talk like airheads the rest of the time

While he was going through testing and focusing on trusting

- Paul was still testifying
- Paul came with a word of encouragement having been encouraged by God
- And dealt with the safety of those aboard the ship in a practical way
- Paul's voice was, in effect, the solitary voice in the storm
- It was the voice of the man of God

It is a challenge for us and yet we too have to face up to the fact

- That in the storms of life, people around us
- Need to hear the voice of the man or woman of God
- It is not always easy to know what to say
- But if we are willing to go forward in faith and with the scriptures
- We can be confident that God will give us some word to share
- This will issue in clear and forthright testimony
- It is important to notice that there is no preaching or forthright evangelism on the ship
- But God is not left without a witness

When Paul can say a word for God he does so

- He speaks of an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve
- There is also the unspoken witness to the gospel through such acts of hope
- Paul shared that through what we would call 'saying grace' before he ate
- What a witness that should be for every believer at every meal

Simple acts of witness and testimony are important

- George Verwer, founder of Operation Mobilisation, used to leave a gospel tract
- With every gratuity or tip he gave to hotel and restaurant staff

During the height of the storm on his transatlantic journey

- John Wesley observed both the shrieking of the English
- And the calm assurance of the Moravian believers
- Their assured faith witnessed to his fearful heart
- In a way that was a critical part of his journey to faith in Christ

Our words and actions can cause us to be agents of hope in a world that often seems hopeless

- It is our task to be beacons of hope amidst the gloom of life's troubles
- And all that might temporarily engulf us
- When people lose hope, everything becomes meaningless

Christian tennis player Michael Chang was the youngest man to win the French open

- It is said that Chang took far longer than all the other tennis players
- To sign autographs – not because he wrote in Chinese script
- But because he wrote God bless you with every autograph
- Wondering if this were true I decided to check it out
- And found an internet advertisement for an autographed photograph of Chang
- The 8 x 10 colour photograph is for sale at \$180 about £100
- But I have to tell you it does not say 'God bless you on it'
- It says 'Praise the Lord! M. Chang'
- Apparently he also signs 'Jesus loves you' – a simple testimony every time

The long narrative of the journey from Caesarea that ends with shipwreck and Malta

- Reminds us to focus afresh on the sovereignty of God
- Through testing, by trusting and by testifying

All through the storm your love is the anchor,  
My hope is in you alone.