

## THROUGH MANY DANGERS, TOILS AND SNARES

Text: Acts 27

Readings: Romans 8:28-39

Theme: Even in a great storm at sea Paul trusts in God and actively works to save others.

Purpose: To urge you when going through great trials to trust in God and work to help others.

Thousands of natural disasters have occurred in the history of the world. Let's recall a few of the more recent ones.

On Boxing Day 2004 there was an earthquake centred below the Indian Ocean that triggered a massive Tsunami that swept onto the coastline of Indonesia causing untold damage and killing 280,000 people.

In 2008 a cyclone swept through Myanmar and killed 138,000.

Closer to home, in February 2009 bushfires in Australia burnt large areas of forest and many homes and killed 173 people, a day remembered as Black Saturday.

And still closer to home, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of Feb 2011 a powerful earthquake destroyed much of the inner city of Christchurch and killed 185 people.

Often we refer to these as "Acts of God". That is an accurate description because we know that God is in control of everything that goes on in the world, including floods, fires, earthquakes and storms.

We don't know why these things happen, although the Bible gives us some general reasons.

Some of these occur as acts of God's judgement, such as the destruction that came on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Some are warnings of the final judgement to come and the need to be ready to meet God on that day.

God also uses events like these to develop perseverance in Christians, to give us hope for the future, and to strengthen the faith of his people.

This is how Paul responded to this act of God in this great storm.

Let's consider four lessons about faith from this chapter.

### 1. The first lesson is that **faith does not take undue risks (v 1-12)**

Paul had completed his third missionary journey and had returned to Jerusalem. While worshipping in the temple he was recognised by some Jews from Asia. They falsely accused him and started a great disturbance in the temple. Paul was carried out of the temple and the Jews were beating him to death. He was rescued by the intervention of Roman soldiers and was imprisoned for over two years. Paul then appealed to have his case heard by Caesar and this was granted.

Acts 27 describes how he was taken by ship as a prisoner to Rome under the guard of a Roman centurion named Julius. Like many of the centurions he was a man of integrity. There were 276 people on board, including Luke who wrote this account.

The ship left Caesarea soon after the Day of Atonement (v 9) in early October, which was late in the sailing season. In verses 4-9 Luke mentions the difficulties they encountered; "the winds were against us...we made slow headway for many days and had difficulty arriving off Cnidus...we moved along the coast with difficulty...much time had been lost and sailing had already become dangerous."

They came to a port named Fair Havens but the owner and captain were not happy with the port as a place to stay over the winter. Paul however warned them not to go any further. You might wonder, "Who does Paul think he is telling these experienced sailors what to do?!" But it is quite likely that he was the most experienced traveller on board, apart from the crew. Before this trip he had already made 11 voyages on the Mediterranean Sea and had travelled over 5000 kms. He wrote to the church in Corinth that he had been shipwrecked three times and had spent a day and a night in the open sea!

(2 Cor 11:25)

The captain and the owner wanted to travel further to the next port where they could stay more comfortably for the winter but Paul thought this was an undue risk. With the benefit of all his sailing experience behind him he said; “Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo and to our own lives also” (v 10).

Paul was a man of great faith in God, and he knew God had promised that he would testify about him before Caesar in Rome, but he knew that to proceed any further would be risky. Many people take risks to achieve their goal. Christopher Columbus took a risk sailing in search of the New World; so did David Livingstone in his expedition into central Africa, but they were calculated risks.

The apostle Paul was not a coward and he had often stepped out in faith; he was prepared to die for the gospel of Jesus Christ but he did not want to throw his life away on an unjustified and foolish decision.

He was an apostle and an ambassador of Jesus Christ but he did not assume that God would miraculously protect him from any harm no matter what he did! He was a man of faith but he also used his common sense.

We need to be prepared to step out in faith but we are not to take unnecessary or undue risks.

**2. The second lesson we can learn from this is that **faith does not guarantee smooth sailing (v 13-20).****

The men in charge of the boat ignored Paul’s advice and decided to sail for the harbour of Phoenix and winter there. A favourable wind blew and they set off. But soon after that they were caught in a wind of hurricane force called the northeaster. Luke gives us a graphic description of the ship being driven by this violent storm for 14 days!

God does rule over the surging sea and he can still the waves (Ps 89:9) but in this case he did not. This time there was no miraculous calming of the sea as Jesus did for his disciples on the Sea of Galilee.

God does not guarantee a safe passage for all Christian missionaries nor for all Christians. Christians drown at sea, missionaries get killed in plane crashes, pastors die in car and motorcycle accidents.

God does not usually alter the forces of nature for the sake of spreading the gospel. Missionaries, evangelists, pastors and all Christians have to work around floods and storms and hurricanes like everyone else. Yes, sometimes God acts miraculously, but only sometimes – that’s why we call these miracles – they are remarkable, unusual, rare!

Some of you may watch the cooking programme *Australian Master Chef* on TV. Sometimes one of the cooks will get an immunity pin allowing them to escape elimination in a later challenge. That only happens on Master chef! None of us get immunity from trouble, tribulation or trial. God does not promise to spare you from sickness or cancer, from financial difficulty or from famine.

God could have given Paul a beautiful smooth sailing all the way to Rome, but he did not; instead he gave him a rough ride. But Paul kept his faith in God even through all this.

About two years before this stormy sailing Paul wrote a letter to the church in Rome. In it he assured those Christians that “nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” – not “trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or sword... no, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us!” (8:39,35,37). This is what Christians believe!

Most of you know the hymn “When peace like a river”. It was written by Horatio Spafford, an American who lived in Chicago. He lost a lot of money due to the Chicago fire of 1871. After that he wanted to give his family a change and a holiday and so sent them to Europe by ship. He had to attend business matters and planned to follow them soon after. However, their ship was hit by an English boat and sank in 12 minutes. The survivors landed in Cardiff in Wales a few days later. Mrs Spafford sent a message to her husband, “Saved alone”. Their four daughters had been drowned.

Her husband boarded another ship to join his grieving wife. On the way he wrote this famous hymn with these lines:

“When peace like a river attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.”

He went on to write about the great comfort it is to know that Jesus Christ died on the cross for all who trust in him; that through him I can know that it is well with my soul.

Faith does not guarantee smooth sailing through life, but if you believe in the person and work of Jesus Christ then you do have a guaranteed destination in heaven!

### **3. Faith trusts God in the storms of life (v 21-26)**

We see this very clearly in the apostle Paul. After the storm had gone on for many days he spoke to all who were on board (v 23f); “last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me and said, ‘do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar, and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you’.”

A few times before Paul had received direct messages from God. This one, like the others, came at a time of great personal need. Paul was a great man of faith but he was human like all of us and he too had his doubts and became discouraged. In these words God reassured him that he would arrive in Rome and that all those on board with him would be kept safe.

He said to all those on board, “So keep up your courage men, for I have faith in God....” He was a prisoner. He owned very little and what he did have with him would be lost in the storm. Yet he had one great possession, “...faith in God”! He believed that God would do what he said; he had faith in God even in this storm.

John Newton wrote the famous hymn “Amazing grace”. He began his sailing career on board his father’s merchant ship in those same waters of the Mediterranean Sea that Paul sailed in. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 1748 he was the captain of a slave ship and was struck by a violent storm off the coast of Africa. During the storm he cried out to God and was saved.

He wrote a hymn reflecting on how God has spared him, in these words:

“Through many dangers, toils and snares,  
I have already come;  
‘Tis grace has brought me safe thus far  
And grace will lead me home.”

God has carried many of us through many dangers, toils and snares.

Are you conscious of God’s grace in your life?  
Are you aware of the love and goodness of God?  
Are you confident that grace will lead you home?

Can you say with confidence that you belong to God, that you have been bought with the precious blood of the Lord Jesus, that you belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to your faithful Saviour Jesus Christ? Do you keep trusting in God in the storms of life?

#### 4. Finally we note that **faith and works go hand in hand (v 27-44)**

On the 14<sup>th</sup> night of the storm the sailors sensed they were nearing land. They dropped anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight.

Just before dawn Paul again took the leadership and noted that for the last two weeks they had all gone without food, so he urged them to eat something; “You need it to survive” (v 34). He led the way by taking some bread himself, giving thanks to God and eating it. “They were all encouraged and took some food themselves.”

It is said of some people that they are so heavenly minded they are no earthly use. Paul was not like that; he was a man of great faith and he was very practical.

You need faith in God’s word in the Bible and you need physical bread to sustain physical life and strength.

Faith also needs to be combined with hard work and skill. It had taken all their navigational skill to get this far and they still needed ingenuity and effort to get to land. No magical chairlift or gondola appeared to carry them from the ship to the beach. In the end they had to swim, or cling to bits of timber, to make it ashore.

In our lives today faith needs to be combined with skill, with financial realities, with strong leadership, with courage, with common sense, with diligent effort and with ongoing prayer that God will bless all the work we do.

Natural disasters occur regularly in the world and sometimes in New Zealand.

Storms often come our way in life and threaten to disturb us.

In such situation of trial and trouble we ought not to take unnecessary risks. We must recognise that faith in God does not guarantee us a smooth passage through life. And we must continue to trust in God as we go through many dangers, toils and snares, knowing that God can and will use the dangers, toils and snares of life to promote the good news about Jesus and to glorify his name.

Amen

*Acknowledgements: I have borrowed the title of this sermon and the illustration about John Newton from David Cook’s commentary, “Teaching Acts”, and some of the lessons of faith from David Gooding’s excellent commentary on Acts, “True to the Faith”.*