



## "Living for Christ in the Midst of a Storm"

Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"

*Acts 27:1-25*

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### **Introduction.**

When I was in the fifth grade, my father got the wild idea that he wanted to buy a boat, take the kids out of school, and sail around the world as a family for a year! Well, my mother persuaded him instead to charter a boat for 2 weeks off the coast of Florida and try it out to see how he liked it, and that adventure made for one of the most memorable family times I can remember.

We chartered a boat named The Malibar Thirteen, a 55 foot Ocean Racing Ketch owned by a couple in Miami. He was the captain, she was the cook, and we were the crew. We sailed around the Bahamas and stopped periodically at different ports. I remember the light house on Bimini Island, the beautiful hotel at Nassau; I remember catching a barracuda deep sea fishing. It was a glorious time.

But I also remember one day that was not so glorious during that trip. It occurred early on in our voyage while we were still getting our sea legs. A violent storm arose, and that little Windjammer was tossed to and fro in 15 foot waves, up and down, up and down. Everyone in my family except my father got seasick. I can still remember my mother from down below in the cabin area, calling out for someone to bring her the bucket. I simply preferred to hang over the railing of the ship and do my business!

This morning we read of another voyage that involved the storm, and this time the apostle Paul was on board. The boat was not a 40-foot Ocean Racing Ketch, but rather a large ship with close to 300 crew and passengers. It occurs while Paul is making his journey to Rome. There are 4 things from the passage that I would like to highlight for you today: 1) the itinerary; 2) the warning; 3) the storm; and 4) the encouragement.

### **I. The Itinerary.**

Paul has embarked on his last journey. The voyage began by sailing up the coast to Sidon. The next port of call was Myra, but things were difficult. The prevailing wind at that time of year was the west wind, and they could make Myra only by slipping above the island of Cyprus and then following a zigzag course up the coast. At Myra they found a ship from Alexandria bound for Rome. It was probably a grain or corn ship, for Egypt was the granary of Italy. If we look at the map, we can see what a long way around they had to take. The strong west wind made the direct journey impossible. After many days of beating against the wind, the boat sailed just to the north of the island of Crete and came to a little port called Fair Havens.

### **II. The Warning.**

It was clear to everyone that they would not be able to complete their trip to Italy; they would have to winter somewhere. The only question was whether they should stay in Fair Havens or seek a better harbor further west. The adverse weather conditions has caused a serious delay. Already the Day of Atonement, referred to as the Fast in this passage, was past. In 59 AD that holiday fell on

October 5. According to the navigational practice of the time, the usual sailing season by Jewish calculation lasted from Pentecost (in late May) to the Feast of Tabernacles, which was 5 days after The Fast. The Romans considered sailing after September 15 doubtful and after November 11 suicidal.<sup>i</sup> Also, ancient ships had neither sextant nor compass, and in cloudy weather they had no means of finding their way.

Paul was an experienced and veteran seafarer. One NT scholar catalogued that the apostle made 11 voyages on the Mediterranean before he set sail for Rome and estimated that he traveled at least 3,500 miles by sea.<sup>ii</sup> While the ship was docked at Fair Havens, Paul advised the captain, the owner of the ship and the centurion to make plans to winter the ship there. But the captain and ship-owner thought differently. They believed that there was a chance of finding a better port farther west along the southern coast of Crete. Fair Havens was not a very good harbor, and it wasn't near any sizable town where the winter days might be passed by the crew. The owner of this particular ship would have been a contractor for the state transportation of grain. The final decision was left to the centurion, who as the highest ranking official on board was the commanding officer. He decided to follow the advice of the experts. They decided to sail on to Phoenix.

This isn't the first time the experts have been wrong. It is important to listen to the counsel of godly people. Many times the experts have been wrong and God's people have been right. When Lorie and I were first married, we lived in Rome, GA where I served as a seminary intern for a year. In the spring of that year, the rains came as they do almost every spring, and the creeks and rivers began to flood. We lived in a little garage apartment near Sommerville Creek which ran through Sommerville Park, and when the rains came the park was completely flooded by the creek. Workmen placed yellow flashing barriers in the street that ran by our apartment, and they were moving them further and further up.

Lorie looked out the window and said, "We've got to get out of this house." I replied, "Now, honey, I've been listening to the radio reports, and they say that the floods have crested, and they will begin to recede now." Lorie insisted again, "We've got to get out of this house." I replied, "No, I've consulted the authorities, and there's no need for us to worry. Things will be okay; we're spending the night here." Well, we went to bed that night, but in the morning we awoke to putrid, awful flood waters that completely surrounded our garage apartment, and we had to wade out in water that was knee high! God taught me a valuable lesson that day -- don't listen to the experts; listen to your wife! And I haven't forgotten that lesson since!

### **III. The Storm.**

An unexpected south wind made the plan appear easy, but then a terrible wind from the northeast struck with great force. It was a wind of hurricane strength, and the peril was that if they could not control the ship, they would inevitably be blown to the Syrtis Sands off the coast of North Africa which were the graveyard of many a ship. With the sun and stars eclipsed from view, they did not know where they were, and the crew began to abandon all hope.

A granary ship was not a small vessel, and it could be as large as 140 feet long, 36 feet wide and 33 feet high. But in a storm, there were certain disadvantages to a ship like this. They were the same width at the bow as at the stern, except that the stern swept up like a goose's neck. Also, they had no rudder like a modern ship, and they were steered with 2 large paddles coming from the stern on each side. A boat like this was hard to manage, especially in a storm. They had only 1 mast with 1 large square sail which was sometimes made of linen and sometimes of hides sewn together. With a sail like that, the ship was unable to sail into the wind, and the single mast with the large sail put a strain on the ship in a strong storm.

Fearing that the ship might break apart, the crew took 5 precautionary measures in their desperate attempt to save the vessel. First, they managed to haul on board their lifeboat, which was taking on water. Next, they passed cables transversely under the ship and drew them tight with their winches so that they held the ship together like a tied up package. Then they lowered the sea anchor to serve as a brake as they drifted in the open sea. After this, they jettisoned some of the cargo to lighten the ship, and then finally, on the 3rd day of the storm, they threw as many parts of the ship's tackle and equipment as could be spared to serve as an additional brake. Eleven dreary nights followed. They had no means of knowing where they were; no doubt the ship was leaking badly. Is it any wonder they began to lose all hope of ever reaching safety? It was into this crisis of despair that Paul stepped forward with a word of encouragement.

#### **IV. The Encouragement.**

In the midst of this general dejection and despair, Paul stood up one morning and addressed his companions in distress. I think that it should encourage us to see that Paul was someone like us when he could not resist the temptation to say, "I told you so. We should have stayed at Fair Havens as I suggested."

But then the apostle went on to urge them to keep up their courage. He said with confidence that none of them would be lost, only the ship. Then he related that the previous night an angel of the God to whom he belonged, and whom he served, had stood beside him and told him not to be afraid. The angel promised that Paul would without fail stand trial before Caesar, and he added that God would give him the lives of all his fellow passengers. He believed in God, in His character and His covenant, and Paul was convinced that the Lord would keep His promises. No amount of shrewd calculation could have given Paul this assurance; it came from a supernatural revelation.

The world has no idea how much it owes to the mercy of God and the presence of righteous people. Here we see the Lord sparing the lives of the men on board because of the presence of the apostle Paul. Believers are precious in God's sight, and as the salt of the earth we have a preserving quality about us.

#### **Conclusion/Application.**

The itinerary, the warning, the storm and the encouragement. As we conclude our study of this passage, there are 2 additional matters I want to point out that I think should speak to our hearts. **First**, notice what Paul says of God in verse 23, "*Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me.*" Whose I am, and whom I serve. What a powerful statement. The apostle Paul knew to whom he belonged, and he knew who it was he served. Do you? It is not as important to know who you are as *whose* you are.

And **finally**, notice the way in which God's divine promises were the foundation of Paul's summons to everyone to maintain their courage. The person of God is the one whose courage stands when fear invades the hearts of others, all because that one knows that God is faithful; He can be trusted. Do you have that kind of courage in the midst of difficult circumstances? Are you resting in the promises of God while the storm rages around you, while other people begin to despair?

The words to the closing hymn we will sing this morning, "It Is Well With My Soul," were written by Horatio Spafford in 1873. The story behind the writing of this great hymn is very moving. A series of personal sorrows led to its writing, and the words express both the poignant reality of trials along with a strong confidence in the providence of God. I close by sharing it with you.

In the late 1860s Horatio Spafford, a businessman from Chicago, suffered the death of his son. This was followed by financial setbacks due to the devastation caused by the Great Chicago fire. In 1873, for the benefit of his wife's health and in order to assist in a crusade in England led by Dwight L. Moody, Spafford booked passage on a ship to England for his family and himself. But at the last minute, because of a business emergency, he sent his wife and 4 daughters on ahead as scheduled, while he planned to take another ship later. However, tragically, on November 22 the ship was stuck by another vessel, and it sank in the ocean. Mrs. Spafford survived, but the 4 daughters were lost and died at sea. As he sailed to England across the same ocean that had claimed the lives of his girls to join his grieving wife, both of them no longer parents, Horatio Spafford wrote this incredible hymn of faith in the midst of his adversity.<sup>iii</sup>

When he had endured financial failure, when he had lost his only son, when his 4 daughters has been killed in a shipwreck at sea, Spafford wrote:

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."

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,  
Let this blest assurance control:  
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,  
And has shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin -- O, the bliss of this glorious thought,  
My sin -- not in part but the whole,  
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more:  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

And, Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,  
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll,  
The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend:  
"Even so" -- it is well with my soul.

My friends, is it well with your soul this day? Do you have confidence in God despite your circumstances? Look to J; cling to Him, and hold fast to His Word. His grace and His love are from everlasting to everlasting. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup>NIV Study Bible notes, p. 1,698.

<sup>ii</sup>Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*, p. 716.

<sup>iii</sup>Adapted from Bryan J. Leech in *The Worshipping Church: Worship Leader's Edition*, p. 519.