

## **Facing Times Of Stress: When God Is Silent (Part Three)**

**The Apostle Paul's Shipwreck**

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**Given 15-Sep-18; Sermon #1452**

The apostle Paul trusted God in all circumstances, even when God seemed silent. Acts 27 contains the account of a great storm on the Mediterranean that overtook the ship that was bearing Paul to Rome. It was a literal storm, but it can also be a symbol of storms that come into our own lives as Christians.

Often when things are going well, we persuade ourselves that we are exempt from storms or that they will not affect us. But we are not, and they will. Then the question will be, Are you anchored to Christ the Rock? Do you trust the One who is able to pilot you through those tempestuous seas? This was Paul's experience. As we continue to look at his story, I want us to see how he prevailed so that we can too, even when God does seem silent.

The 27th chapter of Acts is one of those rare glimpses into a part of ancient life that you just do not find anywhere else and so it is amazing how accurate it actually is. Now confirming this, James Smith was a Scotsman who lived in various parts of the Mediterranean world and he investigated its weather patterns and geography. He recorded the results of his investigations in the *Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul*. He concluded that the account in Acts 27 was the product of an eyewitness who was not himself a sailor. We know Luke was a physician and he was accompanying Paul on this. In a quote from James Smith, "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 seaboard so consistent in all its parts, unless from actual observation."

So there is a confirmation there that Luke was with him as well as another reason that you will see.

Luke's words are accurate in terms of the route the ship took, ancient navigating skills, details of the ship's physical construction, and the way in which the sailors tried to cope with the storm. Smith was right about Luke's

presence on the voyage, since Luke himself indicates that he had come along, and this is the last of three sections in the book, where he indicates his presence by use of the plural pronoun "we" and you will see that throughout chapter 27. The first was in Acts 16 going back in the book, the second was in Acts 20, and the third, beginning with Acts 27 to the end of the book.

**Acts 27:1-3** And when it was decided that we should sail to Italy [that "we" there is Luke speaking], they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to one named Julius, a centurion of the Augustine Regiment. So, entering a ship of Adramyttium, we put to sea, meaning to sail along the coast of Asia. Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica, was with us. And the next day we landed in Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him liberty to go to his friends and receive care.

Aristarchus is also mentioned in Acts 20:4, and he came along too, as it says there in verse 2. He is introduced as a Macedonian from Thessalonica. He was probably Luke's friend, since Luke had been working in Macedonia before this. Now the soldiers transporting Paul used several ships. They set out in the first one to work their way up the Mediterranean eastern coast, around the edge of what we call Turkey today, and gradually making their way west. They had difficulty because at this time of year, sailing was hard. It was very hard because the winter was coming on (they were in the autumn).

**Acts 27:4-5** When we had put to sea from there, we sailed under the shelter of Cyprus, because the winds were contrary. And when we had sailed over the sea which is off Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra, a city of Lycia.

The little group did the best they could, eventually making their way around the coast to the town of Myra and Lycia, as it mentions there. Yet this was still on the southern edge of Asia, and not very far along at all. They change ships there, switching to a larger Alexandrian ship because that smaller ship could not make it to parts of the Mediterranean that were more rough. The smaller ship would presumably continue around the coast of Asia, while the larger ship moved more directly westward over the open sea.

**Acts 27:6-8** There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing to Italy and he put us on board. [Luke still speaking.] When we had sailed slowly many days, and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, the wind not permitting us to proceed, we sailed under the shelter of Crete off Salmone. Passing it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near the city of Lasea.

This Fair Havens has an interesting background to it. Now the travelers got to Cnidus after many days, but the wind would not allow them to follow the most direct route west. So they went with the wind and were driven south toward the island of Crete, which they hoped to round and then be able to sail west along the southern sheltered shore. After much effort, they got as far as the port called Fair Havens about halfway along the island. This was a long, grueling trip, is what Luke is trying to express there.

Now Fair Havens was not a nice place. It must have been named by the Chamber of Commerce to try to get people to visit it because it was a nasty place, and people normally avoided going there. It was now late in the sailing season, and the sailors knew that they not would not be able to reach Rome before winter. They would have to winter somewhere, but not Fair Havens. They must have said, "Anywhere but Fair Havens," because that is how much people hated to go there. There was nothing to do there at all. If they got stuck in Fair Havens, it was going to be a long, hard winter. The weather was nasty. The place was poverty stricken. They knew there was a nicer port further along the coast, a place called Phoenix. So when a gentle south wind began to blow, they decided to take a chance and go for it. Fair Havens must have been so rotten to chance that.

**Acts 27:9-12** Now when much time had been spent, and sailing was now dangerous because the Fast was already over, Paul advised them saying, "Men, I perceive that this voyage will end with disaster and much loss, not only of the cargo and ship, but also our lives." [Paul was speaking from experience, which we will find out in a few minutes.] Nevertheless, the centurion was more persuaded by the helmsman and the owner of the ship than by the things spoken by Paul. And because the harbor was not suitable to winter in, the majority advised to set sail from there also [set sail from Fair Havens], if by any means they could reach Phoenix, a

harbor of Crete opening toward the southwest and northwest, and winter there.

So we see there the detail that Luke actually put in his diary (supposing he kept a diary on this trip), for whatever reason, maybe to show how hard it was for Paul to get to Rome. The fast mentioned in verse 9 was, of course, the Day of Atonement and being in the fall, the prevailing winds were from the west. Besides, the storm season came on in early November, and at that time sailing on the Mediterranean usually ceased for the winter. The sailors simply pulled their boats up on shore and did not launch them until spring. So it would have been three months at least, stuck in Fair Havens if they had not continued on.

**Acts 27:13-19** When the south wind blew softly, supposing that they had obtained their desire, putting out to sea, they sailed close by Crete. But not long after, a tempestuous wind arose, called a Euroclydon. So when the ship was caught, and could not head into the wind, we let her drive. [So the wind was now under control.] And running under the shelter of an island called Claudia, we secured the skiff with difficulty. When they had taken it on board, they used cables to undergird the ship, fearing lest they should run aground on the Syrtis Sands, they struck sail and so were driven. And because they were exceedingly tempest-tossed, the next day they lightened the ship. On the third day, we threw the ship's tackle overboard with our own hands.

So Paul warned them, "Don't do it." But they did it anyway, because there was probably money involved, and were going to make a lot more money getting it there sooner. Paul warned them not to go. Probably God had warned him what would happen, just as He later revealed that no lives would be lost when the ship floundered. But sailors do not listen to landlubbers as was the case for these guys. Certainly not preachers. "What does Paul know?" they must have said. "We can do it." So they started out.

In the New Testament times travel throughout the Roman Empire at certain seasons of the year was frequently quicker and more efficient by ship. And because of that, sea routes became the means for the gospel to travel from place to place, and it spread like wildfire. We learned from II Corinthians

that Paul had already three times experienced this mishap prior to his more notable instance on the way to Rome. What it says there is he already had shipwrecked three times, so he was experienced and he knew what he was talking about when he told them, "Don't do it." But remember he was prisoner, so he did not have a say in that way where he could force his issue.

Paul's description of his shipwreck in Acts 27 took place about two years later, in the autumn of 58 AD. The record in II Corinthians was in 55 to 56 AD, in that range, and this is autumn of about 58 AD. So the interest that centers around this latter event and the light it sheds upon many points of biblical history, geography, and archaeology are significant. Luke's narrative of the shipwreck of the apostle is so full and graphic that we are enabled to trace the causes, the progress, the culmination of the catastrophe in detail. And that is really very unusual for a story like this.

Luke's nice, but artless discriminations show not only his truthfulness, but his ability to carefully observe and accurately record details. This was probably as a result of him being a physician, he was used to recording details. So Paul's missionary journeys include numerous sea voyages, and Paul himself is forever linked in our minds with ships because of that reason. The story of Paul's journey to Rome in Acts 27 and 28 with its accompanying shipwreck, is one of faith in God's promise of protection. And that is what we all need, encouragement of that. If God promises it, it is guaranteed, as we heard earlier.

Now it is a small wonder that Paul turns ship travel to metaphoric uses in his epistles. In Ephesians 4:14, Paul writes that unstable and immature believers are tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching, while in I Timothy 1:19, he writes that those who reject conscience have shipwrecked their faith. So you can see the metaphorical use there of what he actually experienced. By contrast, in Hebrew 6:19, Paul, the author of Hebrews, very likely, pictures those who have hope in God as securely riding out the storms of this life like a well-anchored ship. So that is another proof, in a sense, that Paul wrote Hebrews because you see similar metaphorical use there.

The story tells how the original gentle breeze turned into a great Mediterranean storm that caused the clouds and waves to rage day after day

in a terrifying fashion. Sometimes, facing times of stress, we feel the same way. One minute things are peaceful, the next minute they are not. In fact, they can really slip away quickly in a bad direction.

As Luke tells the story, there was a period of fourteen days in which the men did not see the sun or even the stars. Luke says,

**Acts 27:20** Now when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest beat on us, all hope that we would be saved was finally given up.

He does not qualify it there and say, "except for Paul." We know Paul had faith because he believed what God told him, that he would make it to Rome. Now notice the words of Paul that follow. Were they hopeless or hopeful? Faith makes all the difference here.

**Acts 27:21-26** But after long abstinence from food, then Paul stood in the midst of them and said, "Men, you should have listened to me ["I told you so."], and not have sailed from Crete and incurred this disaster and loss. And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. [Here is the good news and bad news situation. The ship was going to disappear out from under them.] For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you.' Therefore take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me. However, we must run aground on a certain island."

So God repeated through an angel the encouragement He gave Paul in Acts 23 when the Jews determined to murder him.

**Acts 23:10-11** Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks. But the following night, the Lord stood by him and said, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for

as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome."

There is a guarantee you are going to live for a few more years or so because it takes a long while to get to Rome from where he was.

So God's promise, "Be of good cheer, Paul," that He would make sure Paul would safely make it to Rome to witness, was reinforced by God's promise, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar." there in Acts 27:24. But this time God added his companions in His promise of protection. "And indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you."

Now, God has been silent since the murderous Jews set out to kill him, all through the hearings and trials before this. Remember, it was Ananias and the Sanhedrin, and then he appeared before Claudius Lysias, the Roman commander, and then Felix the governor, and Festus, the next governor, and then King Agrippa. And now Paul is headed to Augustus Caesar. So he is really having an opportunity to witness at high levels here.

**Acts 27:27-32** Now when the fourteenth night had come, as we were driven up and down in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors sensed that they were drawing near some land. And they took soundings and found it to be twenty fathoms; and when they had gone a little farther, they took soundings again and found it to be fifteen fathoms. [That is quite a bit of detail Luke is putting in there.] Then, fearing lest we should run aground on the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern, and prayed for day to come. [I wonder if this was the first time the whole trip that those sailors had prayed? But now they were, so they were definitely scared.] And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, when they had let down the skiff into the sea, under pretense of putting out anchors from the prow, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the skiff and let it fall off.

So they began to believe Paul because he was right so far about the storm and telling them not to go.

One day we are in perfect health, are we not? Suddenly we experience pain. Within a matter of hours we find ourselves in the hospital, possibly, and the diagnosis is grim. A horrible storm has descended on our lives. That is how quick that happens. Paul's is a lingering one. It is just lasting and lasting and lasting. But nevertheless, in these times that we face, these horrible times of either bad health or injury or whatever it may be, it seems like God is silent in those times when He is not.

**Acts 27:33-42** And as day was about to dawn, Paul implored them all to take food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day you have waited and continued without food, and eaten nothing. [Wow, that is a long time to go without food. They must have been exhausted and laying around more than anything at that point, but they needed their strength to be able to pull themselves out of this situation.] Therefore I urge you to take nourishment, for this is for your survival, since not a hair will fall from the head of any of you." And when he had said these things, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of them all; and when he had broken it, he began to eat. Then they were all encouraged, and also took food themselves. And in all we [Luke speaking] were two hundred and seventy-six persons on the ship. So when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship and threw out the wheat into the sea. When it was day, they did not recognize the land; but they observed a bay with a beach, onto which they planned to run the ship if possible. And they let go the anchors and left them in the sea, meanwhile loosing the rudder ropes; and they hoisted the mainsail to the wind and made for shore. But striking a place where the two seas met, they ran the ship aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern was being broken up by the violence of the waves. And the soldiers plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any of them should swim away and escape.

So the plan was to kill Paul as well, being a prisoner.

How are we to stand up in life storms the same way Paul did? How would we do if we were in the same situation Paul was? This is how Paul faithfully responded to the storm that had overtaken him. The first faithful thing is that *Paul knew that God was with him*. On this occasion, an angel of the Lord

appeared to him to reassure him of God's presence, and that was powerful evidence. Yet Paul was aware of this truth at other times, too, just as we should be aware of it as well.

Please turn with me to Matthew 28. Jesus Christ, when He was about to leave this world for the final time, spoke to His disciples and said,

**Matthew 28:18-20** And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

Each one of us, members of God's church, members of the Family of God, have this guarantee as well. So when God is silent, we have this guarantee that He is not really silent. "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Now, this end of the age could mean your own lifespan.

The message is the same for us as it was for Paul. "I am with you always." Christians have found Jesus with them as they have gone through life's storms. They testify to it again and again.

Christians testify that God has been with them in a way that is supernatural. God has quieted their hearts, or He has made himself known in small ways that turned out to be so significant the individuals could testify afterward that God did what He did just to reassure them. He taught them that He had a purpose in it all. And I really do think that God's intervention in this hurricane and tropical storm headed for Myrtle Beach was one of these supernatural signs to show us that He is with us.

Do you know that God is with you always? Are you aware of His interventions? When the storms come that will make a great difference.

The second faithful thing is that *Paul knew that he belonged to God*. He owned him. When Paul mentioned God, he identified him in Acts 27:23 as "the God to whom I belong." That is how he witnessed. He told them who he belonged to. He was a prisoner at that point, and there were all those other

slaves onboard, and he wanted to make sure they knew who really owned him. That is, "I am not my own. I am bought with a price. I belong to Him."

In which ways do we belong to God? By using some of the great images of Scripture, we see that we belong to God as, for example, the bride belongs to the bridegroom. Since we, the church, are the bride of Christ, this is a precious, beautiful picture that we are given. Nothing is going to tear the bride from the arms of Jesus Christ.

We also belong to God as a child belongs to his or her father. Since we are God's children, we recognize a basic human duty to care for our children. If a father sees his child being hurt or taken advantage of or persecuted in some way, any decent father comes to its rescue. If we think that way, even though we respond imperfectly, we can be certain that God also does something similar, however far more perfect than a human father can.

Also, we belong to God as sheep belong to the Shepherd. Recall Jesus' story of the shepherd who loses one of his sheep. Although he still has the other ninety-nine, he goes to find the lost sheep and searches until he brings that sheep back.

The third faithful thing is that *Paul knew he was in God's service doing God's business*. Acts 27:23 speaks of "an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve." God had told him what he was to do—he was to bear witness in Rome. As we read the inspired, written Word of God, we see what our commission is and what we are to do, and what we are to do to witness. We are to live godly lives, we are to live God's way of life.

But Paul had not gotten to Rome yet and it does not take brilliance to figure out the implication of those two facts. If God had told him that he was going to serve Him in Rome, bear a witness there, and if he had not yet gotten to Rome, then the storm that was battering the ship on which he was sailing was not going to take his life. God was going to preserve him. What confidence he must have had during that time when everybody else was sure they were going to die. And not only that, this was at least his fourth time being shipwrecked. You would think a person would be getting good at that. But I do not think that is the type of situation that you get calm about.

Now you and I have not received special revelations from God revealing to us any specific length of service or specific future place of service as Paul received. But we can know that as long as God has work for us to do God will preserve us to do it, and God will not be frustrated. If God is not frustrated, we do not need to be frustrated either. I have to admit I was frustrated this week, just watching that hurricane do nothing. But that is something that we do not need to be—frustrated. If God has work for us to do, then God will keep us alive to do it. And if you have finished the work that God has given you to do, why would you want to linger around here any longer anyway?

We may want God's Kingdom to come as soon as possible, but until then we need to get on with our Father's business. But our father's business as parents is to look after our children. So it is another reason we do not want to leave this life yet. We are doing God's business by being good parents and you can come up with no end of examples there.

Paul expresses his desire to be finished with his trying life, but accepts that he has a God-given duty to complete.

**Philippians 1:21-25** For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you. And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of the faith.

He is speaking to the Philippian church there and so he sees a need to continue ministering to them.

Christians have often been tortured for their faith and many have suffered great natural calamities. Some may think that few things could be worse than the things some Christians have suffered. From this perspective, death has sometimes been called a great blessing. However, this distorts the biblical picture. Death for the Christian is never pictured in the Bible as a gain over the worst in this life. Instead, it is portrayed as an improvement on the best. Certainly it is in this sense that Paul intends his words to the Philippians.

We might imagine that Paul was suffering in prison and was anxious for a speedy release, even by the portal of death. But this is just the opposite of what Paul experienced. Paul's life was full. He had been enriched by fellowship with Christ. He writes, "For to me, to live is Christ." He was confident that Christ would be magnified in the way he led his life. He speaks of his earnest expectation and hope that, as always, Christ will be exalted in my body. He was filled with delight that his work at Phillipi was prospered. He even saw evidence of the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ at Rome. These facts fulfilled his deepest desires.

Consequently, the statements that surround his circumstances at Rome are optimistic. It is against this background that Paul terms his death "better by far." What are the benefits of death to those who trust in God? They are at least these: freedom from the evil of this world, conformity to the image of Christ, fellowship with the Father and Christ forever.

At another time, the well-off Corinthian church had suggested giving aid to others in need elsewhere and announced its willingness to share in it. Titus had assisted in the beginning of the project, and now Paul was exhorting them to finish what they had started. It is easy to make promises and then fail to keep them. That is something we see in some people. Some people are great at starting projects but not finishing them.

**II Corinthians 8:10-11** And in this I give advice: It is to your advantage not only to be doing what you began and were desiring to do a year ago; but now you also must complete the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to desire it, so there also may be a completion out of what you have.

So Paul was saying that they had initially intended on sending aid to other churches that were in need and they had failed to continue to do it. Paul's advice to the Corinthians was "finish what you began." Even though they were well off, and it was easily done by them, they still did not carry it out, and he had to remind them, Finish what you have begun. Good intentions, desire, and eager willingness are no substitute for good deeds. A former prime minister of the UK, David Lloyd George, observed, "There is nothing so fatal to character as half-finished tasks." He was a worldly man and he

was speaking of going through life physically, and he had observed that very thing.

This principle also applies to giving. It does no good to want to give if one does not follow through with doing it. Any individual's giving should be commensurate with his means, according to what he has.

The fourth faithful thing comes just a bit later in Paul's speech, where he says, in Acts 27:25, "Therefore, take heart, men, for *I believe God that it will be just as it was told to me.*" Paul knew God, so it was not only the case of God's being with him or his belonging to God or God's having work for him to do it. He also knew God as the God of all circumstances and was able to trust Him for life's details. This is true if we lose our job, if we have cancer, or even if someone we love has died. These things are not insurmountable to God. They are mere circumstances that He brings into our lives and allows to happen for His glory and our good.

**Romans 8:28** And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose.

You and I are called according to His purpose.

Because of the faith Paul had, and because of what he knew of God, Paul was able to encourage others. You saw that in Luke's description of their travels. In contrast, Jonah was running away from God, so when the storm came to batter the ship that was trying to carry him to Tarshish, Jonah was not on the deck helping others. He was in the hold of the ship asleep, like so many Christians. Others were in danger, but he was of no use to them. By contrast, Paul was obeying God, so when the storm broke, he emerged as the real leader of the situation. Prisoner or not, he was the true leader.

**Acts 27:33-35** Paul implored them all to take food, saying, "I urge you to take nourishment, for this is for your survival, since not a hair will fall from the head of any of you." And when he said these things, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of them all.

So he was a true leader encouraging them in the right direction.

The world has little or no awareness of how much it owes to the presence of Christians in its midst. On the ship with Paul were soldiers, sailors, and prisoners, two hundred seventy-six of them. All of them were spared because of Paul. Yet afterward, when it was over, most of them probably went away, never thought of their deliverance again, and they did not thank God. Or at least it was not recorded. So we do have an effect on society and it should be a good one and we should have had influences on people through the years.

God was willing to spare Sodom and Gomorrah if ten righteous persons could have been found there. But there were not ten righteous persons and those cities perished. What about America? I am sure that for all our sin, evil, materialism, blasphemy, determination to eliminate any vestige of God from national life (of course, speaking from the secular stance), God is sparing our country because of the remnant of true Christians, like you and I. Otherwise, this nation would long ago, probably, have been destroyed. It is also giving the Israelites, the descendants of ancient Israel, an opportunity to turn around as well.

Please turn to Matthew 24. Jesus Christ, not long before His arrest and crucifixion, gave a sermon on the Mount of Olives, and He spoke of wars and rumors of wars and other calamities. It was a way of saying, "Life is filled with trouble and you will experience your share of it." But he added, "See to it that you are not alarmed. You must endure it."

**Matthew 24:4-13** And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, "I am the Christ; and will deceive many. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound,

the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved."

We are not to be alarmed by sickness, disease, persecution, or loss of jobs; not alarmed by war with its calamities, not alarmed by life's storms, as difficult as they may be. Why? Because God is the God of circumstances and He can and certainly does preserve us during them. It is our task to trust Him always and bear witness to Him. It is our task as long as God permits us to remain in this world.

As we come to the last chapter of Acts, the arrival of the apostle Paul in Rome, we cannot help feeling, particularly if we know anything about antiquity and have any understanding of the ruins, that it must have been an amazing city at its height. When Paul arrived as a prisoner, he must have been amazed at it, even if he had been there before, which I am pretty sure he had not. He must have been, as a physical human being, in awe of what he saw.

There has probably never been another city quite like Rome. It was the capital of the Roman Empire for nearly 1,000 years, and during that entire time it was literally the focal point of the civilized world. There was also an impressive culture in the Far East, of which the West was mostly unaware. But our culture comes from the West, and during those very important years, Rome was its capital. And even today, in our cities, especially in our capital of Washington, D.C., you see Rome's influence. Even in our form of government, you see Rome's influence.

Paul had been thinking of Rome for a long time himself. He recognized that if the gospel was to be witnessed to the world, then the time would come when when it would have to be proclaimed to the capital. Paul's procedure had been to move from one major metropolitan area to another, establishing churches and then using the cities as platforms from which the gospel could reach out to the lesser communities. He had followed this pattern at Ephesus, Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Athens. Yet he seemed always to have had his mind set on reaching Rome. Earlier, when Paul was in Ephesus, he said in Acts 19:21, "I must also see Rome."

We might think this was only a desire of Paul's, not necessarily one that was seconded or ordained by God. Yet when we come to Acts 23 we find Jesus speaking to Paul personally, saying in verse 11, "As you have testified about Me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome." The angel reinforced this message while Paul was on the ship in the storm in Acts 27:24. The angel said to Paul, "You must stand trial before Caesar." And finally, this much-longed-for event happens. This has been the direction Acts has been moving in all along, of course. We saw this focus at the very beginning, in the outline provided by the words of Jesus Christ's great commission.

**Acts 1:8** "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

That is the outline Luke has been following throughout.

The first seven chapters of Acts focused on the earliest witness of the believers in Jerusalem, and it was a wonderful witness. Miracles were done, the gospel was proclaimed, the church was established, deacons were chosen. They were developmental days for the infant church. Acts 8-11 Chronicles the spread of the gospel to the outlying regions of Judea and Samaria. This was the result of persecution following the death of Stephen. Persecution forced the Christians to scatter into more secluded areas.

Acts 13 tells of the beginning of the great expansion of the church to the rest of the world. Paul and Barnabas began to travel, and the journey eventually took Paul throughout Asia into Europe. It is tiring just to think about what Paul had to do and traveling that he did and how he did it. Four shipwrecks and you know the whole list.

Now, at the end of the book, the apostle Paul comes to Rome and thus Jesus' prophecy that His disciples would be His witnesses to the ends of the earth is going to be fulfilled. Christians were in Rome already by the time Paul arrived, and not only were they there, they were there in considerable numbers. Nevertheless, with the coming of the apostle Paul to Rome, the first great missionary movement chronicled by Acts is completed. The Empire has been reached with the gospel, but before he gets to Rome, he is

still having quite an adventure. He is not quite there yet, but the adventure is still going on.

Turn with me, please, back to Acts 27. We are going to look at two segments of Acts 28. The first has to do with Paul's arrival on Malta, and the second concerns his arrival in Rome itself. Now, when the ship was wrecked, all on board got to shore as Christ had revealed to Paul they would. Paul had explained this to the centurion who oversaw the prisoners. And this man, Julius, who had certainly developed great respect for Paul during the time Paul had been in his custody, made sure that Paul and the other prisoners were spared when the soldiers on the ship, in conformity with Roman custom, wanted to kill them lest any should escape.

**Acts 27:42-44** And the soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any of them should swim away and escape. But the centurion [that is Julius], wanting to save Paul, kept them from their purpose, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land, and the rest, some on boards and some on parts of the ship. And so it was that they all escaped safely to land.

And that ends chapter 27. So we see there that some could not swim, so they had to get there however they could. Some swam and some were on boards, and some hung on to parts of the ship. But every one of them escaped and made it there, just as God had promised Paul.

**Acts 28:1-5** Now when they had escaped, they then found out that the island was called Malta. And the natives showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold. But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat, and fastened to his hand. [It is interesting the way that this physician, Luke, described it "fastened on his hand."] So when the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he has escaped the sea, yet justice does not allow to live." But he shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm.

So after several minutes, when they discovered that Paul did not swell up, fall over, and die, they jumped to another conclusion and assumed that he must be a god. From murderer to a god in a matter of seconds! Their reasoning was wild. Of course, they were wrong on both counts. It is hard to say why people jump to conclusions so easily. But remember, even the disciples of Jesus did it on one occasion.

The story is told in John 9. When the disciples were leaving the Temple with Jesus, they saw a man who had been born blind and they jumped to the conclusion that his affliction must have been the direct result of sin in his life or the sin of his parents. They thought they had worked this through rather carefully, and that all they needed was a little bit of divine revelation to carry them over what they could observe and or figure out. Jesus explained that they were wrong in their conclusions, since neither explanation was valid. Neither the man born blind nor his parents had caused this condition by sinning.

We frequently hear people do this in regard to someone else's suffering. If something bad has come into a person's life, they say, "Well, obviously he (or she) has done something wrong. God must be trying to teach them a lesson." That may be true sometimes, and that is why when bad things come into our lives, one of the questions we must ask ourselves is whether God is trying to teach us a lesson by it. But we need to understand that this is not necessarily the case. In the case of suffering, we must never make the easy one-to-one equation of suffering and sin.

The Bible gives several explanations why believers suffer. It speaks of *common* suffering, *corrective* suffering, *constructive* suffering, *Christ-glorifying* suffering, and *cosmic* suffering. Let us take a few minutes to look at these different types of suffering.

The first one, common suffering. The Bible says that suffering is often just the common experience of human beings living in a corrupt world. Perhaps Job said it best. Observing in Job 5:6-7, "For affliction does not come from the dust, nor does trouble spring from the ground; yet man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward." Also, time and chance happens to all men.

The second one, corrective suffering. When we go astray, God sometimes brings hard things into our lives to bring us to our senses. We must ask ourselves whether we have done wrong or whether God is bringing the hardship into our lives to draw us up short and thereby humbling us so we will get off the wrong path and back onto the right one.

**Hebrews 12:5-11** And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives." If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

The third one is constructive suffering. Constructive suffering is ultimately positive, helpful, and productive. God develops character by what we suffer.

**Romans 5:3-4** And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.

The source of the following narrative is unknown. But someone wrongly declared that, "In this emergency, we must set aside our ideals and face facts realistically." I believe that was a politician, but I am not sure. In reply, a wise Christian said, "Does this mean that Christians are to declare a moratorium upon their ideals during trying periods? To be patriotic and loyal must we, for a time, forget that we are Christians? Are we to assume that the

gospel of love and goodwill is a garment to be put off and on at our convenience? If this is our opinion, then be sure it will be much easier to put off this garment of faith than it will be to put it on again."

So ideals tarnished with disuse, mental gifts that are not refined and broadened by experience are likely to deteriorate. Skills that do not improve with use are lost and forgotten, and character that does not grow with the passing years, is in grave danger of decay.

The fourth is Christ-glorifying suffering. This is what Jesus pointed to when the disciples asked about the man who had been born blind. The disciples were told in John 9:3, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him." In other words, some suffering is simply that the glory of God might be displayed in Christians. It would be presumptuous to assume that this is what God is doing with us all the time. We suffer for other reasons far more often.

Did God let that man be born blind and sit there all those years without sight, merely so Jesus could come along at that moment and heal him and thus bring glory to God? Yes, He did. That is what Jesus was teaching. We focus on the 38 years of the man's life, while God focuses on eternity, and in the light of eternity, the short span of our lives fade into relative insignificance. The man born blind's character was also being perfected through suffering.

**Psalm 50:15** Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.

**Psalm 50:23** Whoever offers praise glorifies Me; and to him who orders his conduct aright I will show the salvation of God.

The fifth type of suffering is cosmic suffering. Job is one of the greatest stories in the Bible about suffering. In Job's case, God was demonstrating to Satan and all the evil and faithful angels that a man will worship and serve God for who God is and not merely because God takes care of him and prospers him. Even when we get to the very end of Job's story, we find that the meaning of his suffering has not been completely explained to Job. The only reason we understand it is because at the beginning of the book we are shown a scene in heaven in which God calls Satan's attention to Job.

**Job 1:8-11** Then the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?" So Satan answered the Lord and said, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge around him, around his household, and around all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But now, stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face."

God permitted Satan to afflict Job and Job comes through triumphantly, though not without a great deal of puzzlement and anguish. And do we not do that in trials? We are constantly wondering why God brought this upon us? Or did He allow it to happen? Or is this just time and chance, or what are we to learn from it, and we go on and on with that puzzlement and anguish.

Turn back to Acts 28, back to the apostle Paul's difficult circumstances on his way to Rome. In a sense, Paul's snakebite was a small incident but it showed how Paul was loving and serving God regardless of his difficult circumstances—captivity, shipwreck, hunger, cold, snakebite. For Paul, it just seemed like it was never going to end that something was going to happen. I cannot help but wonder if he just did not say, "Oh no, not again," you know, type of thing. Or whether he was so used to it, that he was able to just have faith and shrug it off like he did the snake. The people took note of the miracle, and later there were other healings.

**Acts 28:6-8** However, they were expecting that he would swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had looked for a long time and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god. In that region there was an estate of the leading citizen of the island, whose name was Publius, who received us and entertained us courteously for three days. And it happened that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and dysentery. Paul went in to him and prayed, and he laid his hands on him and healed him.

So one who was healed was the father of the chief official of Malta. Chief official is the exact technical term for the person who represented Rome in that place. It is another example of Luke's extraordinary accuracy. There is another accurate detail as well. Luke says that the father of the chief official was suffering from fever and dysentery. It was probably a sickness common to this area of the world, known as Malta Fever. It is caused by a bacterium carried by the goats of Malta and produces symptoms that last four months on average but can sometimes last for years. It was officially identified in 1887.

**Acts 28:9-10** So when this was done, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed. They also honored us in many ways; and when we departed, they provided such things as were necessary.

Now what made the difference was that Paul was aware that God was with him. He knew God had a purpose for him. If God said that he would bear witness for Jesus in Rome, then Paul would most certainly bear witness in Rome. Paul was willing to rest on that. He also knew that with God being with him to such an extent, that he could ask God for healing of individuals and that it would happen.

Perhaps that is where the story should end and where the application should be evidently made for us. We also live in a vacillating world, a world of dangers. And we live among people who are filled with fear. We are called to be, as Paul was in the midst of it, counting on God, resting in Him, and moving forward steadily to do the work He has called us to do.

God is never really silent in our lives. He is always there, dwelling in us through His Spirit.