

Acts 27:1-36.**Power in the Midst of the Storm**

Rare is the person who has not experienced some traumatic crisis in life, whether it be a physical storm that threatens life and property, a familial conflict that threatens or destroys important relationships, crises of great loss or tragedy, or any number of difficulties that come our way.

The tornado warning sirens were blaring, the sky was low, black, and churning in many directions. Jumping into my pickup truck with two neighbors, I attempted to back out into the busy roadway to go to the shelter when the only tornado I have ever seen was on the ground bearing down on us. I placed the truck into forward, jumped the curb, and purposely drove directly into the path of the funnel in order to park snugly against the side of a 2-story brick building, the side facing the tornado, gambling that the funnel would lift over the strong structure. There was no time for any other decision. Instant darkness, a deafening roar, the sounds of gravel driving against the truck, and the sensation of the truck rising and falling. Then dead silence as the truck came to rest. None of us in the truck spoke. I think we were doing a self-assessment to see if we were actually unhurt. The funnel had passed, lifting over the truck and building, causing very little damage. A few months later we moved from Stillwater Oklahoma, never to return. That was a storm.

Many storms that we face are like a tornado, they come up unexpectedly and threaten us with impending loss or hurt. We deal with them using the best resources at hand, often having to make quick and decisive choices based on very little information, and then the storm passes us by, leaving us to pick up the pieces. Other storms are not so short term, impacting us more like a hurricane that bears down on us, and then sits on us, wearing us down. We are left only with questions and a mess to clean up when the storm passes.

What is God's purpose in the storm? What is our source of strength when we face it? When faced with the sight of the tornado, I actually saw only two objects in front of me: the approaching funnel, and a solid building that would surely withstand it. By my drawing close to the strength of that building, it sheltered me

from the storm.¹ Had I stayed away from the building, the truck would have certainly been flipped around like a dry leaf in the autumn winds.

The Apostle Paul had completed his three missionary journeys, and was facing significant persecution by the Jerusalem Jews. When the Jews attacked him, the Jerusalem leadership brought him, like they did Jesus, to the Roman governor with a demand that Paul be punished. When Festus, the Roman governor and King Agrippa interviewed Paul they could not find any Roman law that he had broken. Faced with the dilemma of releasing him and inciting a riot, they chose to honor his request for appeal to Caesar,² and sent him to Rome, thus extinguishing the potential violence that could have ensued, and would have then brought the Roman government upon them all. Unlike the previous governor, Felix, who allowed Paul to languish in imprisonment during his term, Festus promptly put the plan in place and had Paul sent to Rome on the next available ship.

Recall that from the beginning of this conflict, the Romans found no fault in Paul and were reluctant to punish him, so the Jews decided to take the matter into their own hands, and planned to ambush Paul on the road to the hearing. When the Roman officer heard of this he formed a 470-man escort and transferred Paul to Caesarea where he was interrogated by Felix, Festus, and Agrippa. Paul unashamedly spoke of Christ, and all found no fault. When they were almost ready to release him, it was then he appealed his case to Caesar. Why would he do this when he is about to be released? Why is this trip to Rome so necessary that he would prefer bondage in a Roman prison to the freedom to continue his evangelistic work when the latter would produce more churches and salvations? The answer is in Acts 23:11.

Acts 23:11. *The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."*

Listening to the LORD and following Him in obedience will often lead us in directions that would not have otherwise been of our own choosing. The LORD

¹ It certainly helped that I had recently taught a lecture series on thunderstorm and tornado mechanics to a springtime class at Oklahoma State University, in the midst of the American Tornado Belt.

² It is most likely that the Caesar during this time was Nero who reigned from 54-68 A.D.

may lead us out of our “comfort zone” where we find ourselves depending more upon Him. Also note that one would certainly think that it would be better if Paul would continue his missionary work, teaching and preaching the Gospel and starting more churches. It makes sense that this is more important to the Kingdom of God than it would for Paul to languish as a guest of the Roman penal system. However, the LORD had a different plan for Paul, one that may not have been understood even by Paul at the time that this decision was made. Paul made this decision simply because he understood that it was the LORD’s will that, at this time, he would go to Rome and testify on behalf of the Gospel.

Acts 27:1-3. *And when it was determined that we should sail into Italy, they delivered Paul and certain other prisoners unto one named Julius, a centurion of Augustus’ band. ²And entering into a ship of Adramyttium, we launched, meaning to sail by the coasts of Asia; one Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica, being with us. ³And the next day we touched at Sidon. And Julius courteously entreated Paul, and gave him liberty to go unto his friends to refresh himself.*

Note some curious circumstances concerning the initial part of the voyage. These verses are written in the first-person. Therefore, we get an inference of who it was that accompanied Paul on this journey. It appears that along with other prisoners, Paul had the companionship of both Luke and Aristarchus. We also note that Paul was not treated as much as a prisoner as he was as simply a passenger. Remember that the Romans had found no criminal fault in him, so they were giving Paul as much freedom as possible.

When they landed in Sidon after a single day’s travel, Julius, the Centurion in charge of the prisoners, gave Paul liberty to leave the ship and go to his friends for a time of restoration. This implies much about Paul and his relationship with the Centurion. If Paul were to take advantage of this situation and flee, the Centurion would have been dealt with harshly by his superiors. A common penalty for a soldier who lost a prisoner was to take the place of that prisoner. Obviously, the Centurion trusted Paul, and knew that Paul fully intended upon speaking to the Caesar.

Acts 27:4-8. *And when we had launched from thence, we sailed under Cyprus, because the winds were contrary. ⁵And when we had*

sailed over the sea of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra, a city of Lycia. ⁶And there the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing into Italy; and he put us therein. ⁷And when we had sailed slowly many days, and scarce were come over against Cnidus, the wind not suffering us, we sailed under Crete, over against Salmone; ⁸And, hardly passing it, came unto a place which is called The fair havens; nigh whereunto was the city of Lasea.

Paul and his group are intent on sailing to Italy, their course and plan are set, but something is getting in the way. It was evident early on that this was not going to be an easy, uneventful trip. The first problem is a simple characteristic of the season of the year. Felix' delay in getting Paul to Rome resulted in his departure taking place during the late Autumn when the cold winds from the West and Northwest would make travel over the Mediterranean Sea difficult at best, and treacherous at worst. They knew that they were likely to face difficulty, and could only hope to avoid stormy seas. They were receiving the warning signs of a storm.

Likewise, when storms enter our lives, we are often given warning signs. Relationships seldom experience an instant crisis. The conflicts take time to build to the point of inflammation and injury. However, we often ignore or purposely reject any deliberate response to such signs. Often we rely on the hope that the storm will subside, or that it will press its power in another direction, though it seldom does. When a coming storm is left to its own power, and no deliberate effort is made to mitigate its consequences, it often grows until it threatens to overwhelm us. An old cliché "a stitch in time saves nine," refers to more than sewing. The scriptures speak much of wisdom, and include hundreds of imperatives that guide us in how to develop and apply it. Leaving a coming storm to its own power to build and then overtake us is simply unwise.

Acts 27:9-11. Now when much time was spent, and when sailing was now dangerous, because the fast was now already past, Paul admonished them, ¹⁰And said unto them, Sirs, I perceive that this voyage will be with hurt and much damage, not only of the lading and ship, but also of our lives. ¹¹Nevertheless the centurion believed the master and the owner of the ship, more than those things which were spoken by Paul.

The Fast that is spoken of here is that held on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, celebrated towards the end of September. Sailing the shallow Northern Mediterranean is difficult in good weather. There are many small and rocky islands, many rocky shallows that are impossible to see, and their journey includes both day and night travel. To venture into this area into the face of a storm is foolish. Paul perceived the impending danger, possibly alerted by a theophany, and took steps to warn the Centurion.

What would lead the Centurion to ignore Paul's warning and instead listen to the ship's pilot and owner, endangering everyone's lives? He might have felt a sense of duty or a need to complete the mission at all costs. More than likely, he might have appreciated Paul's integrity and intelligence, but doubted his sailing acumen when compared with that of the experienced, seasoned sailors. We might first characterize the response of the Centurion as bullheaded or obsessive behavior, but we may often approach a warning with similar doubts. We are often determined to face an adversary or accomplish a daunting task our own way, and against the sound and wise advice of others we surge ahead. Such demonstrations of pride can serve to blind us to the true source and nature of the storm and to its influence in our lives as we perceive our world through the narrow focus of a set of weak binoculars, with little of the peripheral vision that wisdom engenders. We can be so duty-bound that we do not even see the dangers that we are facing.

The Centurion might have had a temperament of self-strength. Sometime we have an "I can handle it" attitude where the attitude itself overwhelms the application of any wisdom.

Acts 27:12-13. *And because the haven was not commodious to winter in, the more part advised to depart thence also, if by any means they might attain to Phenice, and there to winter; which is an haven of Crete, and lieth toward the south west and north west.*
¹³*And when the south wind blew softly, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, loosing thence, they sailed close by Crete.*

Often the storms that invade our lives introduce themselves gently. There was nothing unreasonable about the decision of the ship's pilot to set sail and

continue with their original plan. Obligated to make the trip, they saw favorable winds and headed westward along the shore of Crete. They had been harbored on the Eastern, leeward side of the island where they were safe from the storm, and were now venturing out into a far more vulnerable area. However, they did stay relatively close to the shoreline. However, the storm would interfere with their plan, expose their vulnerability, and drive them far out into the sea. In what ways do people remove themselves from protection and make themselves vulnerable to storms in life?

Acts 27:14-19. *But not long after there arose against it a tempestuous wind, called Euroclydon. ¹⁵And when the ship was caught, and could not bear up into the wind, we let her drive. ¹⁶And running under a certain island which is called Clauda, we had much work to come by the boat: ¹⁷Which when they had taken up, they used helps, undergirding the ship; and, fearing lest they should fall into the quicksands, struck sail, and so were driven. ¹⁸And we being exceedingly tossed with a tempest, the next day they lightened the ship; ¹⁹And the third day we cast out with our own hands the tackling of the ship. ²⁰And 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.*

Crises. Are people free of having to experience crises in their lives once they have accepted Christ and have the Holy Spirit in their hearts and minds? Does being a Christian introduce more or less crisis into life? We certainly live in a world that is hostile to the gospel, and adherence to it brings one into the fray of that conflict. Some sound advice: love all people, find a common ground, and give gentle and wise testimony. Sometimes that hostility plays a part in the crises we experience, but more often conflict comes from different sources. What are some of the crises we deal with?

In the Spring of 1992, my family was caught in the middle of a very impassioned church-split, brought by a desire for power by a few of its core members. I had just been laid off from a career that had been 13 years in the making. Now, trying to sell the house in preparation for a move to a new place of employment, my neighbor built a steel fence down the center of our driveway in an attempt to seize land based on an erroneous, outdated survey, sending us to court. Shortly

after leaving our home and extended family for employment in another State, my wife's father, the patriarch of our large family farm, unexpectedly died. I once jokingly stated that I would purchase T-shirts for our family that said, "We survived 1992."

Some of our closest friends, called to the missionary field, were excited to arrive in Kuwait, setting up their home with the prospect of their new ministry in front of them. In August of 1990 they ran from their house as it was overrun with armed and hostile Iraqi troops, dodging bullets as they drove to the American Embassy where they were later held under an extended siege by Saddam Hussein's republican guard. They were the first civilians to enter the embassy and the last to leave during that event.

It is axiomatic that we can all think back and remember events in our past that brought tremendous conflict and loss. Many times we might blame God for "allowing" this to happen to us. It is easy when, immersed in the trauma of conflict, to lose sight of our faith and the resources that the LORD provides us to help us persevere and overcome the stressors. When we turn away from those resources, we might give up hope.

Acts 27:20. *And 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.*

Consider their dilemma. What is the status of an ancient sailing when they had been driven by the storm's winds and had seen no sun or stars for many days? They have no idea where they are. By letting the storm drive them, they have no idea of how far they have traveled or in what direction. They could smash into unseen rocks or reefs at any time. This trip was now long past "perilous." They believed that their situation was hopeless.

Consider a modern parallel: you are flying in a commercial airliner that enters a large storm and gets struck by lightning. The pilot loses his flight computer, altimeter and communications so he is flying totally blind. The plane is battered by strong turbulence and one of the engines fails, the others are on the verge of failing. The passengers are nauseous from the turbulence and terrified. Some curse, some weep. The flight attendants are strapped in their seats, but nobody

is interested in eating at a time like this. The pilot tries to provide assurance over the intercom, but his strained voice betrays his terror. He knows that finding a landing place is near impossible, and the plane is so damaged that a normal landing might be impossible anyway. How would you react to this situation?

Acts 27:21-25. *But after long abstinence Paul stood forth in the midst of them, and said, Sirs, ye should have hearkened unto me, and not have loosed from Crete, and to have gained this harm and loss. ²²And now I exhort you to be of good cheer: for there shall be no loss of any man's life among you, but of the ship. ²³For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve, ²⁴Saying, Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee. ²⁵Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me.*

People's personalities vary considerably. Some are takers, spending their efforts on taking and receiving. Others are givers, giving of their time and resources to others. Paul was a giver. What did he do? How would the passengers react if someone on that fateful plane flight stood up and made such a pronouncement to all of the people? Likely, some would curse, most would ignore him, but a few might believe.

What present-day circumstances may cause believers to feel hopeless? How can these verses help us to remain courageous in the face of difficult circumstances? What other Bible passages give you comfort during times when others may feel despair?

Romans 8:28. *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

Paul's letter to the Romans reminds them that God has an ultimate purpose in all of the things that happen in our lives, and that purpose is clear: that through them we would be conformed to the image of Christ. The writer of the book of James states the same argument another way:

James 1:2-6. *Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.*

Often when all seems lost, people are ready to jump at the slightest trace of deliverance. Note that James says, "Perseverance must finish its work." Why? Some crises we face are beyond any human control, such as natural disasters. However, much of the crises we experience are directly linked to human sources. Consider:

James 1:13-18. *When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.*

What is the source of our testing? Much of it is caused by the effects of our sins upon each other. What are some of the sins that people openly commit which hurt other people? What are some of the things we know as Christians that can encourage us at times like these? We are called to encourage one another. We know God's grace is sufficient; God knows the fall of each sparrow, and that with God all things are possible.

Why did Paul have such confidence in his security and the security of the crew? He heard God speak to him through an angel. How often do we fail to hear God when He has made His will available to us?

Acts 27:26-30. *Howbeit we must be cast upon a certain island. ²⁷But when the fourteenth night was come, as we were driven up and down in Adria, about midnight the shipmen deemed that they drew near to some country; ²⁸And sounded, and found it twenty fathoms: and when they had gone a little further, they sounded again, and found it fifteen fathoms. ²⁹Then fearing lest we should have fallen upon rocks, they cast four anchors out of the stern, and wished for the day. ³⁰And as the shipmen were about to flee out of the ship, when they had let down the boat into the sea, under colour as though they would have cast anchors out of the foreship, ³¹Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved.*

One response to crisis is to try to jump ship. Some of the crew tried to deceive the others and leave on a lifeboat, leaving the others behind. What Paul said was very similar to what James said in 1:4. God had a plan, and that plan required obedience and endurance. In order for God to work a miracle, we must be in a position to have one take place.

Where is the best place to be in a crisis situation? Certainly a good place to be is in the center of God's will. Paul was so positioned at this time. Just as the sailors were working hard at coming up with a way to avoid following God's plan, we may expend such energy doing the same. God may be calling us to be obedient to His leadership while we are resisting. What are some things that God may be wanting of us, yet we resist? Consider God's call to the tithe, service, witness, or even full-time Christian service.

People often take matters into their own hands and look for answers in all the wrong places. What are some of the places people look? One does not need to look far to find promised solutions in drugs, charlatan psychics, purchases, the deceit of others, the deceit of self, or rationalization. People ignore God's loving counsel and thus rob themselves of the resource that will create the kind of spiritual growth that God has planned for us in the experience. They fail to see the strong fortress that will protect them from the storm.

Acts 27:31-34. *Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved. ³²Then the soldiers cut*

off the ropes of the boat, and let her fall off. ³³And while the day was coming on, Paul besought them all to take meat, saying, This day is the fourteenth day that ye have tarried and continued fasting, having taken nothing. ³⁴Wherefore I pray you to take some meat: for this is for your health: for there shall not an hair fall from the head of any of you.

One of the things we often fail to do in a crisis is take proper care of ourselves. When the plane is ready to fall out of the air, we are not interested in ordering a piece of pizza. Likewise, when we are surrounded by an overwhelming problem, we may take our eyes off of our own needs, particularly when we are working to meet the needs of others. What are some of the needs that get neglected? Usually they are the basic physical needs: food, rest, hydration, etc. Also, we too often forget our basic emotional needs: significance, self-value, love of others, and love by others. When we do not address our own needs we can become ill and unable to face the storm as effectively as we would have done with a wiser approach to the situation.

What happens when we fail to address our emotional needs? We may face depression which when unabated can easily devolve into feelings of anger, pity, lack of self-worth, and despair. Depression can come from a failure to meet our emotional needs when we place our intense focus on our own interpretation of the problem rather than its solution or the big picture of its purpose in our life. We think that we must get through, when in reality we can lean on Jesus, and let Him carry us through. We must realize how important we are to God, and seek him. Consider some of the wisdom found in the biblical narratives.

Proverbs 3:5-6. Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. ⁶In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.

Acts 27:35-36. And when he had thus spoken, he took bread, and gave thanks to God in presence of them all: and when he had broken it, he began to eat. ³⁶Then were they all of good cheer, and they also took some meat.

Why are our physical needs important to God? Why are our emotional needs important to God? We cannot function properly when these needs are not sufficiently met. Before Paul's shipmates ate, he stated a prayer of blessing for the food. Let us never forget the source of our sustenance, and of our deliverance. Also, let us never forget the power of prayer and how it serves to maintain the connection we have with the LORD, even in times of stress.

A crisis is a time of testing that reveals what we are really "made of." What are you really made of? How are you going to respond in a time of crisis? Paul's example to us is a clear one. He placed himself in the center of God's will by listening to him, considering what God was doing and ministering to the needs of others through God's strength after finding courage based upon God's promises. He remained composed and consistently faithful to the LORD in his manner, and also reached out to other people in danger, helping them to confront and overcome their fears.

Jesus said that we are salt and light.³ Paul was certainly that in the midst of the storm.

Back to the tornado. When we see the crisis, we focus in on it. Had I focused in on the funnel cloud, the source of danger, we could have lost our lives. However, looming in front of me was a fortress, a brick building that would serve to deflect the power of the storm. By drawing as close as possible to the fortress we were protected. Likewise, storms in our lives are opportunities to draw close to the fortress of God's arms. Just as the building gave us its strength against the wind, God's arms of protection give us His strength to overcome any storm that we might experience so that through it we can become more mature, more faithful, and more conformed to the image and mind of Christ.⁴

³ Matthew 5:14-16.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 2:16.