

Part 42: Heavenly Hope and Helping Hands

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If you've ever held a toddler who wanted to be put down, then I'm sure you know what dead weight feels like. If you've ever been part of a group project, you know what dead weight feels like. And if you've felt overwhelmed in life to a point where you can't do anything, nor find anyone to help—then you know what dead weight feels like.

Today, we continue our study in the book of Acts and as Paul finds himself unjustly imprisoned, blatantly ignored, and stuck in the mess of other people's choices—he's not dead weight. As the storms in Paul's life get darker, his hope in God gets brighter—and it's the real-world implications of Paul's hope that stands out to us this morning.

You'll see a phrase repeated a few times in this passage. As the sailors tried to find relief from the winds they sought to sail under the "lee" of other islands. That's a nautical term which means that they used the islands themselves as shields from the wind—they literally sailed under the island's protection. But eventually—they ran out of islands.

Life in a broken world means that we will often run out of islands, and it might seem we are out of luck, and out of help. But what Paul shows us today is that a Christian is never out from under the hand of God. And when we find ourselves safe under his hand, we are often the most qualified to lend a helping hand to those around us. Christians are never dead weight.

The title of our sermon this morning is, "Heavenly Hope and Helping Hands." Our main idea will be this: **Life under God's hand is life with helpful hands.** The hope believers have in God's providence makes us both spiritually and physically helpful in the midst of life's problems. There's something about the gospel that changes how we live and respond to trials in our life and the lives of those around us. Paul's life highlights three of those areas this morning: **Christians Concern, Christian Counsel, and Christian Commitments.**

From a narrative perspective, our passage today describes how Paul was transported from Caesarea in Palestine, to Caesar's court in Rome. But Luke, who was present with Paul during the transport, describes this journey in great detail. In fact, many historians regard Acts 27 to be one of the most detailed descriptions of sea travel in the 1st Century.

In a world where there were no passenger ferries, Luke describes for us the general practice of the day: **Luke 27:1-2**, "And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort named Julius. And embarking in a ship of Adramyttium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica."

Here, the centurion entrusted with Paul's transport, went down to the docks to find a ship sailing in the same general direction where he would have made arrangements to pay the captain if he would allow them to ride with him. They skipped along the coast of Turkey, until they came to Myra. There, the centurion found another ship. One from Alexandria.

These ships were the Clydesdales of the sea. Traveling from Alexandria in North Africa, Rome relied on these trade ships to bring them their precious supply of Egyptian wheat to feed their global empire. The size of these boats represented their economic importance. They were roughly as wide as this room, nearly 2.5 longer, and over twice as tall as this room.

But despite the size, the sea is still a difficult place. Luke describes the journey this way: **Acts 27:7-8**, "We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, and as the wind did not allow us to go farther, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone. Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea."

While the journey was already getting hard, Paul had a feeling it was going to get harder. And here we see our first point this morning: **Christian Concern**.

It shouldn't be lost on us that Paul, though a prisoner with little say, was probably the most knowledgeable sailor on the whole vessel. The book of Acts records Paul spending at least 3 months at sea. But his letter to the Corinthians would inform us of many more travels he had including, "Three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I was adrift at sea."

Sea travel was no joke. In fact, the Greek poet Horace once said, "the ship was first conceived by a sadistic degenerate whose mission was to destroy humanity."

Paul knew not only the general dangers of sailing, but he also knew winter was coming. Verse 9 tells us that "the Fast" in Jerusalem was over, which means this journey was now taking place in late October/early November. It was generally accepted that this particular stretch of the Mediterranean was impassible during the winter due to fierce winter storm patterns. Knowing this Paul speaks up. **Acts 27:10**, saying, "Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives."

But, Luke continues: **Acts 27:11-12**, the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. They decided that their current harbor wouldn't last through winter anyway--so they were going to try and make it to Phoenix, a safer harbor and were going to spend winter there.

Now I want you to notice the competing concerns here in this text. Julius is concerned with his task to bring Paul safely to Rome. The pilot is concerned with meeting his timelines. The owner of the boat is concerned with the monetary value his payload has and wants to make sure he himself gets his money before winter comes. But Luke tells us that Paul is concerned with, "the cargo, the ship, and the lives of everyone on board." While everyone else seems to be thinking only in the economic pattern of "every man for himself," Paul's concern is uniquely other oriented.

As Christians, we live in a world that is so concerned with the individual, with personal or economic benefit. That's where the gospel makes us wonderfully disruptive. AI can make decisions based on quantifiable data points, but AI cannot see or value the weight of the image of God, even in those who do not yet believe. Paul models for us a recognition of the world not only as we see it--but how God sees it. We don't merely see people as it relates to our own benefit and our own needs, but the needs of those who are around us.

It was our savior himself who called his disciples to, “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.” It’s all too easy in the storms of life to think only of what we might need, but if God has already provided for us all things in Christ, then we are uniquely positioned to consider the needs of others over and above our own.

But despite Paul's concern, he's ignored. And notice what gives these men the confidence that Paul is off his rocker: **Acts 27:13**, "Now when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close to the shore."

Now, while most of us have never been warned about the dangers of travel at sea--we've all been warned by God and others about the dangers of sin. And we know the same sort of whispering comfort that often comes. The Bible says we should be concerned about sin's danger--but often we feel it's warm breeze and we think that it will be of the greatest help to us.

But we often know that the whispers of sin, and a disregard of biblical concern doesn't lead us to safety--but instead it drives us to places we never wanted to go. And here, this is what happens: **Acts 27:14-20**, "But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along. Running under the lee of a small island called Cauda, we managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat. After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing that they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and thus they were driven along. Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. And on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned."

Here we see our second point this morning: **Christian Counsel**.

All those who didn't listen to Paul took many steps to get out of their own problem. Luke walks us through these steps: First, they secure the lifeboats and then tie chords around the ships bow to keep it from being torn apart by the waves. Still under threat, they then dropped the anchor—but the winds still drove them along. The next day, still violently tossed, they threw out their cargo. After another three days, they threw out most of their emergency supplies. And finally, after many days passed, they finally threw out hope. They hadn't yet abandoned ship—but here Luke tells us they abandoned hope.

But Paul sees a hope they don't. Paul's initial advice was the result of his human wisdom—but now he shares a divine vision with them: **27:21-26**, "Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.' So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we must run aground on some island."

They no longer had the shelter of the islands to help them, their worldly actions to save the ship couldn't help them. But Paul speaks up here and reminds us of a truth we ought never forget: Even for those who feel like they are too far gone, even for those who feel like you have no hope, you are never outside the help of God.

Paul's hope led to practical help. To a group who abandoned hope he says, "Take heart...Listen, I belong to a God who controls the winds and the waves--and he has told me that we are going to make it. Why? Because I've got unfinished work in bringing his gospel to the nations. But here's the deal, this good God, this powerful God, has made it clear that we are going to crash on some island. It's going to get worse, but take heart...it will be exactly as I have been told."

In 1 Timothy, Paul speaks of two men who had left the gospel and made a shipwreck of their faith. But here, Paul is commending a shipwreck of faith in a good way. If these men want hope, they are going to have to trust Paul's God through a dangerous shipwreck.

The goal of any sailor is not to crash. The goal of any human seems to never encounter a trial. So, it would seem counter intuitive to them and to us to trust a God who promises safety even when he promises a crisis. But their own attempts to secure safety have failed. I've heard that armadillos in the rainforest are aware of how dangerous their environment is. They spend each day doing the hard work of digging a burrow in which they might spend the night. Yet each morning, they are unsatisfied, and they begin the hard work of digging in again in hopes that this burrow will hold. But each day, they dig.

Even in the face of God's clear counsel, so do these men dig: **Acts 27:27-31**, "When the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven across the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms. A little farther on they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms. And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship's boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved."

Look ahead to what happened when they do finally crash: **Acts 27:41-43**, "But striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf. The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape. But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land."

Notice how we have two groups of men: sailors and soldiers. One knew the law of the sea, the other the law of the land. They each heard Paul's plea for hope—but they each trusted their own counsel. The sailors rich knowledge led them to doubt they would survive the crash—so they were going to try it on their own. The soldiers knew that if they survived the crash—but if the prisoners escaped on land—they would themselves be put to death. So, it was in their interest to kill the prisoners.

But Paul intervened with the sailors and reminded them that unless they stay with the boat, they would die. And the centurion, perhaps now starting to believe in Paul, put a stop to the plan of the soldiers.

And in trusting the word of a prisoner regarding a God they could not see, Luke tells us, **Acts 27:44**, "And so it was that all were brought safely to land."

Dear Christian, in the midst of life's storms, are you willing to trust the counsel of God even when the immediate counsel of your heart or the world feels safest? It's so easy to feel the pressure of life, to look at the hope we have in Jesus, and yet to question if that hope actually helps. We are quick to reach for

those life boats of comfort and escape and we are quick to treat the spiritual disciplines of our faith as deadweight that we must cast aside if we want to make it to shore.

We are physical people who live in a physical world—we can't escape that and we shouldn't. God made us body and soul. But I want you to notice the way Paul deals with food in this text. Look back at **Acts 27:21**, it's there that Paul notices these men haven't eaten at all. But what's interesting is that Paul doesn't encourage them to eat there! It appears it's days before he finally tells them to eat. Paul first shares with them the hope he has—hope that he belongs to a God and that God has promised salvation. Then, when it seems despair is finally setting in again look at what happened: **Acts 27:33-38**, "As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food. For it will give you strength, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you." And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat. Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. (We were in all 276 persons in the ship.) And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea."

Did you notice that? When were people first encouraged? Not after they ate—but after they saw Paul eat! But then after they had eaten enough, they threw out the rest of the food! They emptied the vast storehouses of worldly goods into the sea. Why?

Paul reminds us of what we often forget: worldly needs might give us necessary strength—but they can never give us our necessary hope. He saw they were weak—but he saw where they were weakest. These men were literally sitting on a warehouse of food—yet they were hungry. But once he corrected what they didn't have, hope in God, they ate, were encouraged, and confidently threw the rest of the wheat into the sea.

Christian, do you give away that counsel to others? Or are you so fixated on the world meeting our needs that you neglect the God who gives to us life and breath and everything. These men could have eaten every bit of grain on that boat—but what they needed was not grain (for they had enough!). What they needed was hope for life. And that kind of counsel can only come from those who find life in Christ.

Personally, this kind of hope is what drives my evangelism. I was raised in a Christian home and was a good kid. The cross gives me an emotional framework for my sin. But I often don't see sin in others with the level of urgency I ought. But what does give me urgency in evangelism is the hopelessness of life without God. This text exposes that there are millions and billions of people who will encounter the storms of life—a medical diagnosis, a car crash, financial troubles—and in that moment, they have no hope. Just this week, flood waters in Texas have carried away the beautiful young girls of many parents—but in the midst of life's deepest terrors, we have hope that holds even through death. We do not grieve as those who have no hope.

But Paul wants them to know he has hope, even when all seems lost. And that hope comes by trusting this God. It is true that none of us have been promised physical deliverance from a storm at sea on a boat sailing to Rome. We don't have confidence to say that to anyone. But we do know where to point people to find salvation from sin don't we? We know the arc of Christ who carries us through the storms of life—and apart from him no one will be saved. We all must be wrecked. But let us wreck ourselves on the cross of Jesus which gives life. Do you give that hope to those around you?

When your neighbor has a financial issue, we are eager to offer help. When their plumbing is broken, we recommend to them a plumber we trust. But when we realize that their lives and their hopes sit on the precipice of eternal hell—do we offer them the hope of heaven.

The Christian hope is not an impartial or impractical hope! It is deeply human hope. There is nothing more helpful to us, or to others than that which we possess in our hope. Dear Christian, do you have a hope that leads others to Christ? For if you do the whole of your life will be that of happy, and helpful hope.

And this leads us to our last point: **Christian Commitments.**

After they are all brought safely through the shipwreck, they find themselves on the island of Malta. Luke continues in **Acts 28:2-6** describing the unusual kindness the native people showed them by building them a fire. But as Paul gathered sticks, a viper fastened on his hand. The natives see this and say, "No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." These guys know a poisonous snake when they see one--and Paul's a goner.

See how quickly we might despair another challenge in life if we do not hope in a God who is Lord over all of it. If our circumstances dictate our hope--we will often wonder if we are really saved. But when our hope is in the God who alone saves us--we work heartily under his own hand.

Look at what happens next: **Acts 28:5-10**, "He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god. Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him. And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed."

Paul's concern on Crete caused him to give a helpful warning. Paul's confidence during the storm caused him to give lifesaving counsel. And here, having made it through all of it we see his continued Christian commitment to serve others.

He didn't arrive on the beach and sulk as if to say, "I told you so and now look at this mess I'm in." Nor did he lord it over them--even when the natives thought he was a god! How easily could Paul have whipped his new worshippers up into a frenzy to free him from his captors.

But instead, as soon as he landed, he was the one who started gathering wood for others. And while we don't read of it here on Malta--the last time people thought Paul was a god--he used the opportunity to share with them the wonderful hope of the true and living God and how he has saved us from justice by sending his Son to die for our sins on the cross.

You see when we realize that we live life under God's sovereign hand--we know that wherever we land, with whomever we are with, we find ourselves committed to God's work. When we are never outside of God's plan--we always find our purpose.

The Romans and the men of Malta, quickly realized that you can take the Christian out of service and put him in chains and on a doomed ship, but you can't take service out of the Christian. Because we have hope in any circumstance, Christians can be helpful in any circumstance. The gospel makes Christians the Energizer Bunny of helpful hope.

Our commitments to glorifying God and loving others is a commitment that God has made attainable to us in every circumstance we could ever find ourselves. Let us not forget that, "we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works which he prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

I think the story of a boat, dead in the water, and a plan dashed up against the reef is one that's needed more than ever today. It is often the concerns of life which blind us to the concerns of those around us. It's often the counsel and comfort of worldly commodities which rob us of counsel that really comforts. And it's often the paced and frantic commitments of schedules and events which compete with the commitments we ought to have towards God and others.

But if we have the hope of the gospel—then we have the help of the gospel. When all Paul had was hope—he was the most helpful. Let us not, in our lack of chains and our safe distances from the reef, use our liberty and freedom as the reason our own hope is not as visible or helpful to others.